Meowraculous Chat Noir Zine

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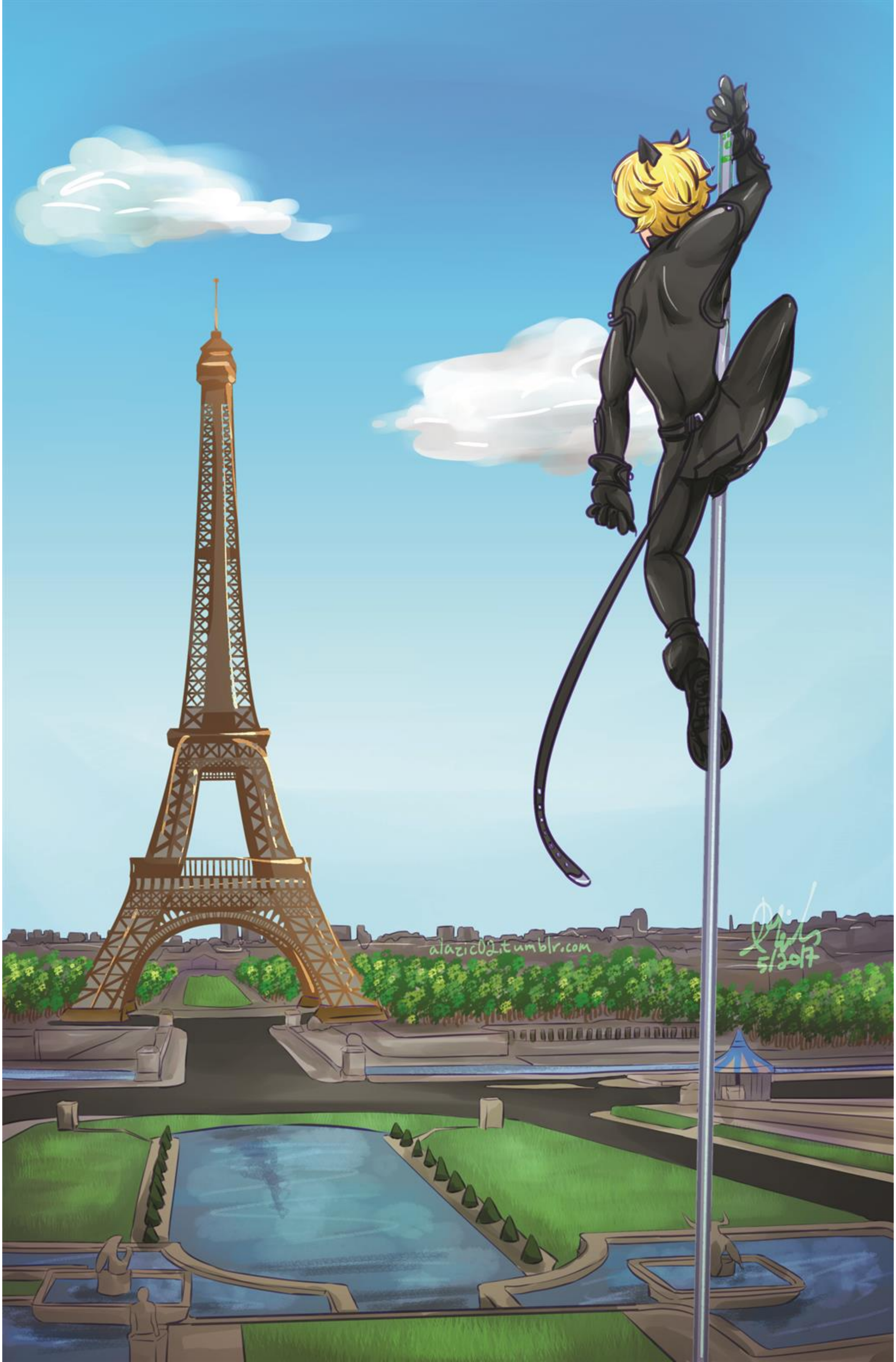
Ainsil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WE LOVE YOU
CHÂT NÔIR

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there's something lonesome about this

It's… kind of funny when you think about it, Ladybug. The way I should crave attention, the way I do *crave attention, but when I get it…*

… It's not what I want…

My name is Adrien Agreste. Every morning, I wake up and ride to school.

I've always longed to go to school, ever since I was a child, but both my parents thought it was too dangerous. Then Mère vanished, and Père was too busy nursing his wounds to spend time with me. It was my opportunity to finally be with kids my age, to be able to hang out at school with Chloé and make friends with people just like me.

It was… kind of gullible on my part, this belief that I would automatically get along with everyone. I managed to make two girls angry just on the first day, and if it wasn't for Nino, I…

Well, I doubt I'd actually look forward to going to school.

Nino's friendship means so much to me, sometimes I'm afraid that he'll leave me because he doesn't know how important he is. He's the first normal person I've talked to, who doesn't react to how easily I can throw away money, and just. He genuinely doesn't seem bothered that half the time he wants to do something, I can't.

I wonder how my bad luck let me meet someone like Nino.

Other than Nino, I haven't really clicked with anyone. Chloé's my childhood friend but… recently, it feels like she's isolating herself from me, desperately trying to cover up something. It worries me, because despite the distance that's grown between us, I still care about her. I don't want her to destroy herself because she's trying to deny herself happiness.

All my other classmates, they just. Feel like they're just there. Like they're out of my reach, always a step too far for me to catch up to.

And I… I hate this feeling. I crave to be in between all of them, to laugh when Alix says something ridiculous to Kim, or coo with Rose when Mylene shares something super sweet Ivan did. I crave to have them watch me, to ask me about all these stories I have caved up in my head; how that one time, I started crying because the mannequin I was standing next to was much bigger than I was, or even the time I got yelled at for standing in the rain and just crying.

Or the night after my mother's disappearance, when her family came to visit us for the first time, and my father abandoned me to a restless night of staring at the ceiling, in a room full of strangers.

But they go on too fast, jumping topics and conversations and lifetimes, leaving me stranded with my lonely childhood stories. It makes school somewhat unbearable when Nino isn't there, because apart from him, everyone else has me in a glass case, separated. Pretty too look at, but too fragile to be touched.

Sometimes, I wonder if that assessment is really all that off the mark.

After school, I barely get to see Nino. I either have to stay after for fencing or basketball, and on the rare days that I don't, I always have a photoshoot to go to, piano lessons to attend, or even a session with my Chinese tutor.

It's kind of ironic. For what my father lacks in love, he doesn't in keeping me busy. Laughable… until I realize it's actually kind of sad.

And it's the same damn routine every day, of filling up my days with something, anything. The only reprieve I have is transforming into Chat Noir and getting to see you.

To me, you're the embodiment of everything this world should be filled with. Good, kind people, who can stand up in the face of danger even they're terrified. People who can have so many flaws, and yet don't let them define them.

I guess that's why I fell in love with you in the first place. To me, the world really does begin and end with you. You fulfill every single one of my dreams of the kinds of people I wanted to surround myself with when I grew up.

And yet, I still feel lonely. Sitting next to Nino, or watching as my classmates laugh, I feel disconnected sometimes. I can't tell if it's because I make myself feel that way, or if it's this unseen thing inside of me caused by my abnormal childhood.

Either way, I hate it. I hate the way I feel wary of every person who tries to be nice to me, afraid that they're someone looking to manipulate me. To use me for their own gain.

I'm tired of feeling vulnerable in this way, like any person can come and take advantage of me. I don't want to live like this.

I just-

"Adrien," Nathalie's voice calls, and he turns his head to find her staring with an eyebrow raised. "We're here."

He nods, shooting her an automatic smile before his hand reaches to open the car door. As he gathers his stuff and walks towards yet another photoshoot, the part of him screaming to be let loose swallows yet another speech. He promises himself that Ladybug will hear all of it when the sun sets.

Late at night, Chat Noir is too busy making Ladybug laugh to open the door on the word he's choked back.

-astrangetypeofchemistry

2017
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Somewhere Only We Know

Adrien knows better than to allow daydreams to chase him into reality.

There was a time, when he was younger, that his mind wandered. It found solace in his imagination, in the places between the pages that his mother read. Her voice carried him into warm, late evenings, wrapped up in coverlets that swallowed the both of them until they fell asleep.

His earliest memories are filled with her scent, with her soft hands on his face, in his hair. There must have been a point, when her presence became a memory, and then nothing more than a questionable daydream. But it's a trail that Adrien's traveled too often, and now he can't discern the line.

His father reminds him that there is a time and place for everything.

There is a time for grief and sadness, but where this time has a place, he's yet to discover.

It isn't in the late afternoons he spends outside his father's study, hand poised at the door, lingering until he's lost his nerve to ask about her.

It's not when he lies alone in bed, staring hard at photographs that grow more dated with every month that passes. He memorizes them until the screen's light burns, and her smile is etched into his eyelids as he falls into a restless sleep.

There is no time for her in their lives – not anymore.

Every new appointment, every hobby and lesson that his father fits into his schedule leaves less room for her memory.

There is a time and place for everything, he knows – but there is no place for her. And with every day that passes, Adrien feels there is no place for him.

A place outside of Gabriel Agreste's role for him, as the model son and heir to a fashion empire. A place where he can escape the expectations, the rules and routines and demands.

It's a place he hungers for, beneath the eyeholes of a mask, outside his name and his father's scrutiny.

It's hidden in the dark streets of Paris, over the scattered rooftops and scaling monuments. It's his heartbeat thrashing against his ribs unevenly, pulse thrumming as he scales the looming heights above busy streets.

And more recently, it's next to his Lady.

On the nights when he isn't thinking of his mother, when the ache for her subsides, his mind traces a familiar path to his partner. He imagines her features, the soft outline of her cheeks framed by dark hair. Her smile reaches her eyes, and they're gentle and blue. She's shaking her head at him, at something he's said undoubtedly, but it fills him with ease. He feels safe – comfortable, loved.

Adrien drowns himself in the warm scent of vanilla, in the traces of people and places she encounters in the hours they spend apart. It sweeps out his thoughts, and he forgets himself for a moment.

He forgets that this place – their place – isn't real.

It's in his head, a space he shapes for himself when she's gone. When the days are especially grueling, and he can't discern friendliness from ill intent. It's a place he covets when there is no time for dreams.

When there's no time, and there's no place for him.

"Adrien."

Like now.

Nathalie lingers in front of his bed, her binder clutched in one hand, a pen in the other. She fixes him with a disapproving grimace, and his gaze is drawn to the place where her brows meet, knitting dangerously over weary eyes.

"Adrien, I need you to pay attention; this is very important."

It's always important.

"There's another modeling shoot," she says quietly, "At the end of this week."

The remark strikes him, harder than he had anticipated. He schools his expression into casualty.

"On my day off?"

His voice is too strained, and the tone has escaped him before he's had a chance to swallow it down. She's hesitant. He can see it in the way she turns her attention to her paperwork, thumbing through a schedule she's already memorized.

"Yes," she pauses, adding, "It was your father's request."

As though that's enough to explain away the intentions behind the alteration. As though, his father's personal desire for it somehow excuses the abrupt change.

And in her mind, perhaps it does.

The disappointment pitches low in Adrien's throat. It forms a lump that sinks into his chest, and he struggles to pull in a breath.

"Of course," he says.

He can feel himself smiling, and it must be enough. Because Nathalie nods, scribbling something down. She begins reciting details – something about a time and place, the name of the photographer.

But her forehead is creased, lips downturned as she looks away. Still tired.

No.

Her brows are still furrowed, but it's different. Not irritated.

Sad.

There's pity there, and it cuts into his stomach – so much worse than the disappointment. It haunts him as she gives him instructions for the rest of the evening, closing the door behind her retreating figure with a solemn click.

It leaves a stillness that wraps him like a vice, blanketing the room and tightening his lungs.

It's suffocating.

There's no place for sadness. It's an emotion he carefully folds and pockets, with the rest of his father's unmentionables. There are memories there that are too painful to touch, too fresh for visiting, and it's a dangerous path of self-indulgence that he'd rather not trek.

Adrien desperately reaches for remnants of solace. The daydreams that he selfishly clings to, despite the knowledge that he shouldn't. But there is no peace there – only thoughts and anxieties that lie in wait for a moment of ease.

Adrien fingers his ring, eyes moving to the window.

The city lights are alluring, even from his perch on the bedside; it's a distraction he's no stranger to. Nathalie is resigned for the night, and his father is submerged in his personal work. There are guards on the grounds, and the Gorilla is stationed outside his door.

It's an appealing escape that collects risk with every attempt he makes.

Adrien feels himself unlatching the window, scaling the ledge before he's even called out to Plagg.

He had already agreed with Ladybug that they wouldn't patrol tonight. Superheroes or not, they were still adolescents, and Paris couldn't be saved if they were sleep-deprived.

But on a night like this, Chat Noir would usually be running his rounds, peering over balconies and busy streets. Tonight, his feet follow the routine of it, trekking the length of the docks overlooking the Seine, past bistros and dimly lit markets.

He allows the monotony to lead him down the quiet alleys, tracing steps he's taken a hundred times – both in the company of his partner and on the nights he cannot sleep.

His clawed hands scrape shingles, baton extending over cobblestone. It feels solid in his hand, and he grips it tightly, lurching onto another roof.

Chat knows this neighborhood.

He's managed to circle around to a familiar street – the corner of the Dupain-Cheng bakery, and the outline of his school is within sight. Not far from here is his home, but he lacks the heart to return to it just yet.

There's lights on in the attic of the bakery, and after several seconds of watching for movement, he realizes it's Marinette's room. He wonders at the reason for her being awake at this hour.

Chat lingers for a minute longer before he ducks away. If she were to see him standing here, directly across from her home and eyeing her bedroom, she'd no doubt find it creepy. It's inappropriate, and Adrien Agreste is nothing if not a gentleman.

Aside from that, there are better things to do than spy on one's classmate.

He's already leapt to the next building, one foot anchored on a banister, his free hand gripping the railing – when he hears someone speak directly behind him.

"I thought we had agreed we wouldn't patrol tonight."

Chat's heart lodges in his throat, and he nearly loses his footing.

He twists around, eyes darting up, above the length of masonry. Ladybug's petite form is outlined by stars, looming above him on the ledge of the adjoining building. Her expression is shadowed, but her posture is particularly displeased.

He clears his throat, finding his voice.

"We had."

"Then what are you doing out here?"

She places a hand on her hip, and he imagines the grimace she must be wearing. Tired, exasperated.

Chat pulls himself over the railing, and by the time he's scrambled onto the roof, Ladybug has already crossed the distance between them.

"I needed to clear my head," he says honestly.

Her eyes follow him as he rises to his feet, brushing himself off.

"You know, when I need to relax, I read a book or draw. I don't run around Paris in a super suit," she points out.

Chat Noir smiles cheekily, "I had no idea my lady was an artist."

The look she shoots him is withering.

She's unusually tense tonight, and he's not entirely sure why. This isn't the first time she's caught him outside of scheduled responsibilities. She's found him on numerous occasions, sitting outside the Louvre, talking to stray cats and feeding them canned tuna.

It's not uncommon for her to scold him for wandering the streets and drawing attention.

"What if the media starts taking pictures and accusing you of another crime? What if you get mobbed?"

"You're worried about my fangirls?" he had jested.

But Chat knows her intentions. He knows her irritation is stemmed from concern, a very genuine obligation to their friendship and partnership that he's undeniably grateful for. With that in mind, he's been intentionally careful recently to avoid civilian eyes.

And it must have been working, because until now, he'd avoided hers as well.

"Chat," she says, "We've talked about this."

"I'm being careful," he assures her.

Ladybug frowns, and he can see the tension again.

"Why don't you go home? Drink some tea or take a bath?" she ventures.

His chest tightens, and Chat Noir swallows thickly, forcing a grin.

"I could ask you the same question. What are you doing out here?"

She glances away, and his eyes are drawn to the slope of her neck. Dark hairs wisp against her collar, disappearing against the black material of her suit. Stray strands escape her pigtails, and he can see them haloed by the glow from the city lights.

"I was in the neighborhood," she sighs.

The way she says it pulls at his thoughts, and Chat follows her eyes.

The lights are still on above the bakery, and he idly wonders at how Marinette still hasn't gone to sleep. When he looks away, Ladybug meets his gaze.

"Do you… live around here?" he muses.

It's a thought he probably shouldn't have voiced. The alarm in her expression is masked quickly, but it doesn't escape him.

"I live in the area."

She looks pained, and Chat realizes that she hates lying. He knows she wouldn't lie to him. He remembers her discomfort at sharing personal information, and he instantly regrets placing her in that position.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

Ladybug glances away, and he feels his stomach sink.

It's never like this. She can be reserved, unresponsive to his questions and advances – he's used to that. He knows her boundaries, and he respectively walks the line that she draws for him. But it's difficult to read someone that is veiled behind secrets, and sometimes his personal desire to know her shrouds his consideration. He should be able to do better, as a gentleman – as her partner.

It's several long, agonizing minutes before she speaks.

"Are you okay?"

The apprehension in her voice takes him by surprise.

"What?"

"You're not yourself tonight," she says simply.

Chat laughs, "And who am I supposed to be?"

She stares for longer than feels comfortable, as though she can see through his attempts at humor. And on reflection, she probably can.

He forgets at times that their partnership is a two-way road. He assumes that he's the only one who pays close attention – that picks up on details and mannerisms. For him they're treasured clues to her real identity, and he gathers them eagerly.

But with all the time they've spent together, it can't be sensible to believe she wouldn't grow to know him, too.

"I need to pick something up first," she says, "But if you meet me at the Notre-Dame Cathedral, I'll be there in ten minutes."

She cups her arms, rubbing warmth into them as she shifts her weight. There's a hesitance in her posture that seizes his heart, and he second-guesses that he heard her correctly at all.

"If you want to," she adds.

It's an affirmation, and Chat restrains the giddy disbelief that bubbles inside him. It astounds him that she can question his desire to spend time with her. And the prospect of stealing another moment with her, when there's a different reality waiting for him at home, is far too appealing to refuse.

"I would love to," he says softly.

Ladybugs don't bake.

At least, not in Adrien's experience. But how she managed to get ahold of such a large amount of pastries this late at night, on such short notice, is nothing short of miraculous.

They had spoken briefly about their favorite foods in some of their conversations, but he hadn't imagined she'd remember. And as Chat chews a mouthful of the sweet, flaky crust, he finds a new reason to love her.

"Do the people you live with even feed you?" she laughs.

He flashes her a toothy smile, "Not like this."

Ladybug shakes her head at him, and he's momentarily distracted by the warm light from the Notre-Dame on her face, casting the rest of her features in shadows.

The heroes' legs dangle freely over lone pedestrians below, couples and onlookers that stop to snap photos with the Cathedral's timeless architecture. So far no one has spotted the two teenagers perched 115 feet above their heads.

"I'm sort of dieting," Chat admits, "And sweets aren't usually on the menu."

Ladybug glances at him, and he can feel her eyes move over his figure. "How long have you been dieting?"

He shrugs, "A few years?"

She pinches her pastry, tearing a piece off and popping it into her mouth. Her eyes are downcast, focused on something in the distance.

"I know we don't talk about our personal lives," she says quietly, "But if there's something bothering you, I want you to know that you can talk to me about it."

"I'm not being starved," he pledges.

Ladybug fixes him with a dubious look as he reaches into the pastry box between them. He waves his treat at her before biting into it.

"Especially if we make these outings more frequent."

She rolls her eyes, but there's amusement playing on her lips. "I don't think I can afford it."

"I'm not an expensive date," Chat teases.

“Well, that’ll be good news for whoever dates you, then.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Are you not thrilled?”

She elbows him, and Chat Noir lets out a cough of laughter. The tension from before seems to have faded for now, and he’s glad for it.

It’s a pleasant quiet that stretches between them. It settles in the space where their legs nearly touch, their shoulders brushing comfortably. Ladybug’s gaze lingers on him as he eats, and she leans back, head resting against a pillar.

Chat licks his fingers, a heartening warmth spreading through his stomach.

“I’m serious, Chat.” she says quietly.

He turns, taking in her somber expression.

“About dating me?”

This time, when she elbows him, he expects it.

“About listening to you, if there’s something you need to get off your chest,” she prompts.

Chat leans back against the opposite pillar. Their knees touch, and he almost doesn’t mind the new distance between them.

Ladybug bumps his leg with her own, and it draws his attention up to her eyes. She’s staring at him, and there’s something steady and pressing in her expression.

“Before anything else – we’re friends.”

It could be the pastries, settling comfortably in his gut – or the warm light on her red suit, glowing pleasantly off her skin. The combination is a sedative, and he can feel himself relax against the stone behind him.

“And you don’t mind?” he asks.

“Of course not! Why would I?”

Chat gestures between them.“You’ve said before, that it’s better we don’t know about one another.”

Ladybug frowns. “I know I’ve said that, but–”

“You’ve said we should keep our lives private.”

“That’s for our own safety.”

Not for the first time tonight, Chat’s stomach tightens.

“It’s safer for us to keep secrets from each other?” he asks.

Ladybug stills, and he can sense the companionable atmosphere fade. There’s something in her expression, and it pulls him back to before, on the rooftops. There’s hesitation, and another emotion he can’t pinpoint.

“Chat, it’s not like I want this.”

He shouldn’t be upset – he knows that. He respects her feelings, and he respects her need for privacy. But there’s an ache in his chest that he hasn’t shook from his encounter with Nathalie, and it gnaws at his insides.

It whispers insecurities and fears in his ears, reminding him of his shortcomings. It tells him that Ladybug is better off without him, that she doesn’t want to reveal herself to him because she’s ashamed of him.

It’s absurd – and more absurd is that he’s tempted to believe it.

“I don’t either,” he says.

She turns her head, eyes moving to the near-empty cardboard box. There’s sadness in the slope of her brows, disappearing beneath the mask.

“If something were to happen to you – to either of us – and Hawkmoth had an opportunity to get information out of us, it would be better if we didn’t have any knowledge to give.”

She lifts her gaze. “Wouldn’t you feel better knowing that if something happened to me, I wouldn’t be able to give you or your family away?”

His pulse thrums. “You wouldn’t.”

Ladybug frowns.

“You think I would?” he whispers.

“Of course not!”

“Then why is this an issue?”

“Because I have to keep you safe!” she exclaims.

Chat’s mouth goes dry. He can see the emotion now that he didn’t recognize before.

Regret.

“Why?” he breathes.

Her expression shifts, and she levels him with an incredulous look.

“Because you’re my partner. You’re my friend, Chat, and–”

“We’re a team,” he says, “We’re a team that is equally responsible for each other. We take care of each other. This isn’t a one-sided thing, bugaboo.”

She looks down, and he plows on.

“It’s not your job to keep me safe. Why–”

He throws his head back, letting out a frustrated noise.

“Why is everyone so concerned with keeping me safe? You’re not keeping me safe, you’re keeping me in the dark. It’s like you don’t trust me.”

His heart pounds, and it’s in his ears. He closes his eyes, willing it to slow to an even rhythm.

“Chat, this isn’t just about me, is it?” she murmurs.

No, it’s not.

“I have a lot of things on my mind.”

A beat passes between them. Her hand slips over his, and his eyes fly open. She’s leaning forward, arm stretched across the space between them. Her dark hair spills over her shoulders, a hint of red ribbon glimpsed behind her ear.

Her voice is hushed. “Talk to me?”

Ladybug’s irises are gentle and blue, just as he’s imagined them countless times in his dreams. But she’s not smiling, and there is no playfulness between them – not now.

Her hand is warm, and he turns his over, palm-up. She looks down at where their fingers intertwine – red on black, spots and claws.

His voice is low and tremulous. “There’s someone that needs me, and I don’t know how to help him.”

She speaks slowly, as though carefully mulling over each word. “Is he hurt?”

His mind goes back to his father, to the day his mother left. He watched a silent, stiff Gabriel look over his wife’s portrait with unseeing eyes.

“Yes.”

“How do we usually help people that are hurting?”

He pulls in a breath.

“We tell them it’s going to be okay.”

He feels her squeeze his hand, and Chat looks up. She’s on her knees now, so close he can feel her breath stirring his hair. Ladybug ducks forward, until their eyes are level. He can see the faint freckles splashed across her nose, the flush in her cheeks from the cool, night air.

It grounds him, and for the first time tonight, Adrien doesn’t feel like he’s escaping reality.

“Chat.” Her voice is firm, “That’s all you can do.”

He searches her eyes, but there’s no pity there. There’s no expectation and no resentment. It sends a pang through his chest, and Chat feels the tear slip down his cheek before he’s even registered it.

“It’s not good enough.”

Her gloved hand slips around his neck, and Chat lets her pull him forward. His forehead falls onto her shoulder, and her dark hair tickles his face.

“You are good enough,” she says quietly, resolutely.

She holds him as though she knows, and perhaps she does. The scent of vanilla fills his nose, and Chat inhales deeply. It’s just as he’s dreamed it, but this time, he doesn’t have to close his eyes.

She rests her chin on his head, and his heart slows to a steady, languid rhythm as she draws her fingers through his hair. He clings to her, and she doesn’t pull away.

“It’s okay, Chaton.” she whispers.

Ladybug says it again, and even after the third time he doesn’t tire of it. It’s a cool balm on his chest, and he pulls in long, even breaths. He can feel her heartbeat against his ear, and lulls him into a warm, comfortable place. A place where he feels safe – loved.

Her voice carries him into the late hours, and he forgets himself.
He forgets that this place – their place, is real.

-avelyst

Small Victories

Chat Noir sat waiting, hidden in the branches of the tree. Below him, the precocious little girl settled herself down beside the small courtyard fountain. Her mother had disappeared back into the townhome a few minutes before with her cell phone, but he waited until she was safely absorbed in the conversation with her colleagues before venturing forth from his hiding place. He really wasn't in the mood for an interview today.

The girl didn't notice as he leapt silently to the ground, too caught up in waving her magic wand over a stuffed unicorn.

Chat took a steadying breath and tried to relax. He knew he could probably turn around and disappear without anyone being the wiser. No one was expecting him. His follow up visits to the akuma victims was hardly public knowledge after all. Alya had never even posted anything about it on the Ladyblog, despite her firsthand knowledge of his extracurricular habit.

Still, he had already put off this particular visit for longer than he should have due to his own hesitance.

He took a few steps closer and let out a practiced cough, hoping that his nervousness didn't show.

The girl spun around to look at him with wide, owlish eyes. She was so young. Far too young.

He bit his lip and forced his worries to the back of his mind. Maybe he didn't have a lot of experience dealing with children, but that was no excuse not to follow through with his mission.

"Manon, right?" he said, coming the rest of the way forward and dropping down unto his haunches beside her.

"Chat Noir?" she asked, fidgeting nervously with her wand, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," he said with his most reassuring smile. It didn't have the desired effect and he had to fight to keep the expression from wavering as she seemed to cower back away from him, panic in her eyes.

"Are you here to take me away and lock me up?" she said, the combination of fear and resignation making his blood boil in anger.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said as calmly as he could, "I am here to make sure you are doing better, like I do for all of my friends."

She gazed at him thoughtfully. "Do... do you think I am going to turn evil again?"

"Of course not," he replied, horrified that this girl, who couldn't be more than six or seven years old, even had to ask such a question.

She dropped her gaze to the ground, her wand clenched in her trembling fingers like a lifeline. "All the other kids are making fun of me," she confessed, "only grownups get turned into akumas. So they think I must be extra bad."

"Well that's just silly," Chat said, "One of my best friends got turned into an akuma, and he's the nicest person I know." He put his hand on her shoulder comfortingly but she shrugged him off, flopping down to the ground as she let out a miserable little sniffle.

"I'm not bad, I just wanted to win. What's so wrong with that?" she choked, looking at him with large tear filled eyes. "And now everyone is looking at me funny, and telling me that I am bad, and even mama…" she let the sentence die off, clutching her toy closer to her chest. "I just wanted to win," she whispered.

Chat Noir was careful to keep his expression neutral, even as he felt his heart break for this girl. She reminded him of Chloe when they were both that age. A little spoiled, and a little selfish perhaps, but so full of energy and life and potential. Far too young to be branded as irredeemable by something out of her own control, especially in her own mind.

He carefully reached out and grabbed onto the wand, looking at her for silent permission before plucking it out of her hands and twirling it gently between his fingers.

"If you think about it," he said as he looked down at it thoughtfully, "technically, you did beat me." He looked up at her. Her mouth was pursed into a guilty pout, but the slightest tinge of hopeful pride danced behind her eyes.

"There aren't many akumas who have done that you know," he said holding back his own smile as she tried not to preen in excitement, "only the most powerful and most determined ones."

"Really?" she breathed.

"Really," he replied, without hesitation, "Hawkmoth doesn't choose akumas because they're bad. He can already make people bad. He chooses the people who are the strongest because how else is he going to defeat Ladybug and Chat Noir?" He tapped her on the nose with the wand and she laughed delightedly.

Her expression sobered as she took back her wand, "But Ladybug always wins."

"Against the akumas yes," Chat said, leaning in closer and meeting her gaze, "because she is a hero and that's what she does. She has to win against the akumas so that Hawkmoth doesn't get the miraculous."

Manon nodded. "Because that would be bad," she guessed, biting her lip fretfully.

"Definitely," he replied solemnly. "But you know, just because Ladybug always wins against the akumas doesn't mean she always wins at everything."

"She doesn't?"

"Nope. Wanna know a secret?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Ladybug is terrible at *chat perché*."

"Ladybug is bad at playing tag?" Manon gasped delightedly.

"Absolutely awful," Chat said.

To be honest he had no idea whether or not Ladybug was good at the game, it wasn't like the topic had ever come up between them. However, he doubted the small white lie would come back to haunt him. "Even My Lady, as truly magnificent as she is, is not perfect all the time. No one is you know."

"Wow," she said with a brilliant smile, looking off into the distance in awe.

Chat hummed in agreement.

"You know I am really good at playing tag," she added conspiratorially.

"Well then maybe the next time you're having trouble with your friends, you should suggest playing a game! That way they will see how talented you are too."

"I can do that," she said determinedly. Her expression turned serious and he waited patiently for her to gather her thoughts.

After a few moments of silence she turned to him with a look that seemed far too calculating for her childish features.

"Chat Noir?"

"Yes?"

"Are you any good at *chat perché*?" she asked, as if it was a question of the utmost importance. He bit back his laughter and gave her a teasing grin.

"What do you think?" he asked slyly.

"Well, you are a cat," she said knowingly.

"And don't you forget it," he said, reaching out and giving a playful little tug on one of her pigtails. She giggled happily and he felt himself relax. It looked like she was going to be okay.

"I won't," she smiled, before shyly adding, "Thank you, Chat Noir."

"You are very welcome."

He stood up, stretching a bit after being crouched over for so long and gave her a jaunty salute. "Well I should probably be on my way."

"OK, thanks for visiting," she said bouncing up onto her own feet as well.

He flashed her another smile and turned to go, but paused when he felt a soft tug on his tail.

"Here," she said, holding out her toy wand to him, "for you."

Chat looked down at the simple, little piece of plastic, in wonder. "You're giving this to me?" he asked.

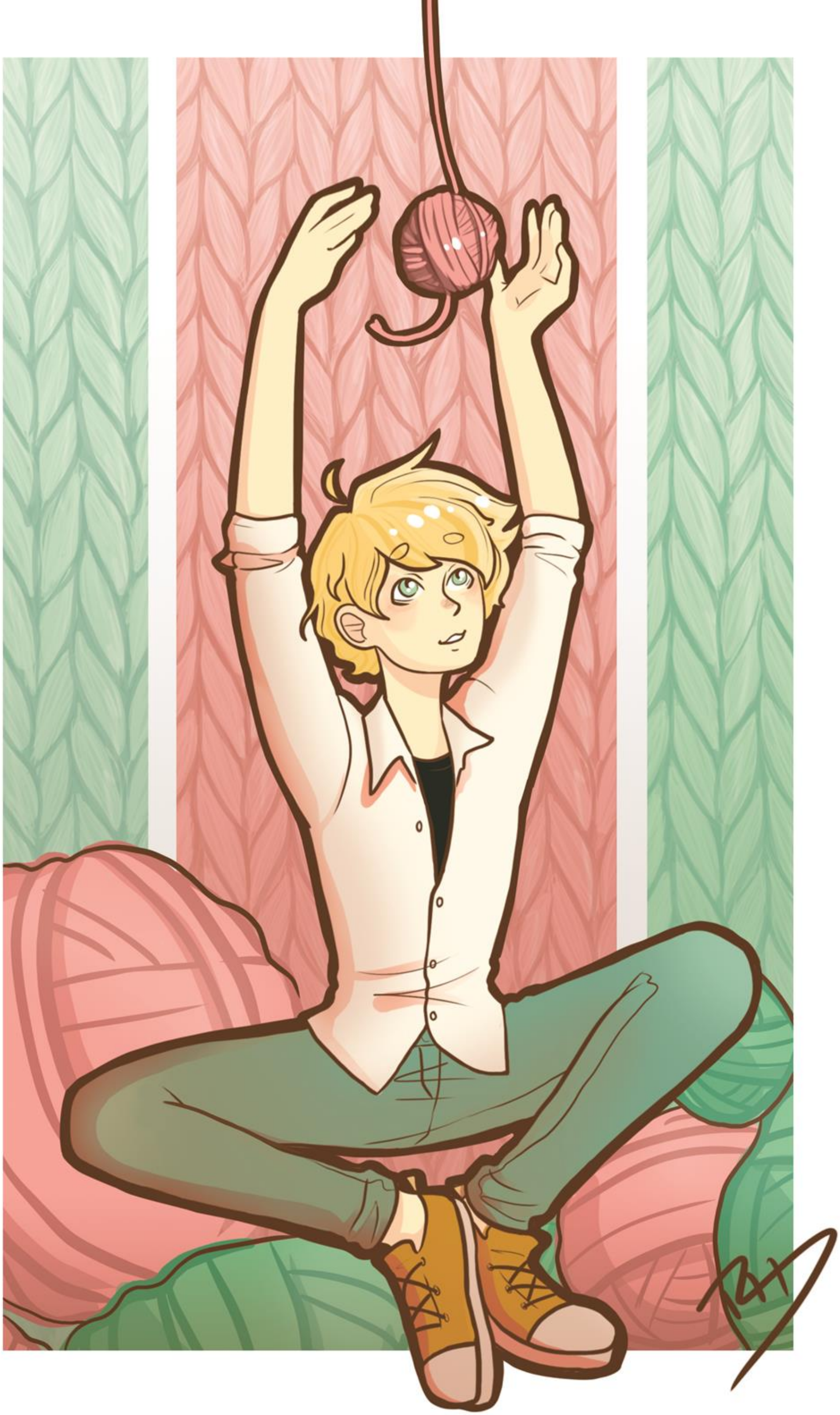
She nodded, still holding it out with a hopeful expression, as if he would somehow refuse such a precious gift.

He bent down again and carefully took the pink toy, the sunlight glistening against the bright golden star. "Thank you, I will treasure it always."

Her smile lit up her face and she wriggled happily at her successful offering. "Come back and visit me again sometime! Maybe we can play tag!" she called, giving him an excited wave as he quickly climbed back up the tree and to the rooftops from which he had come.

-baneismydragon

BARASCHINO



BIBBID
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Camembert
Physique
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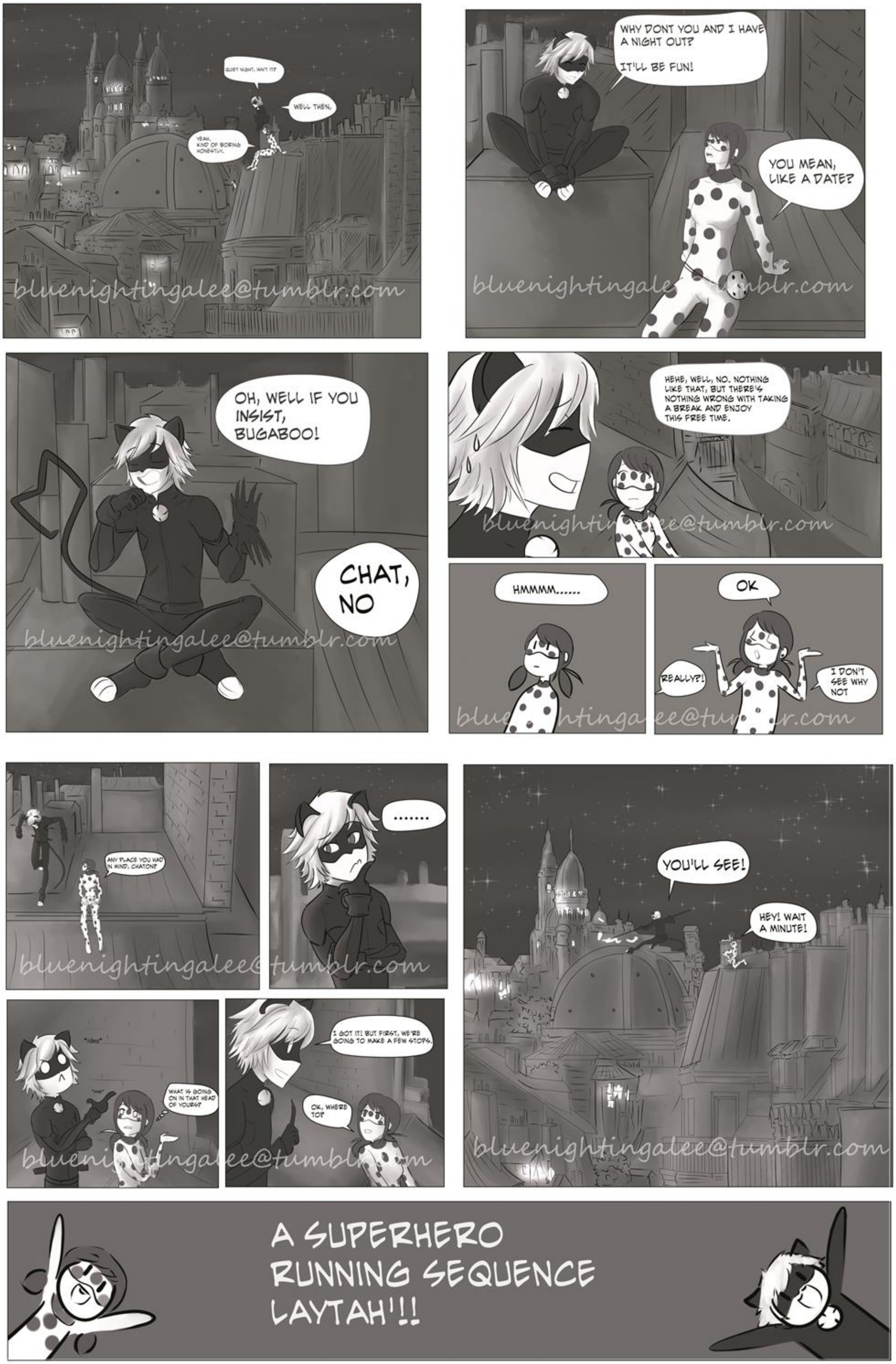
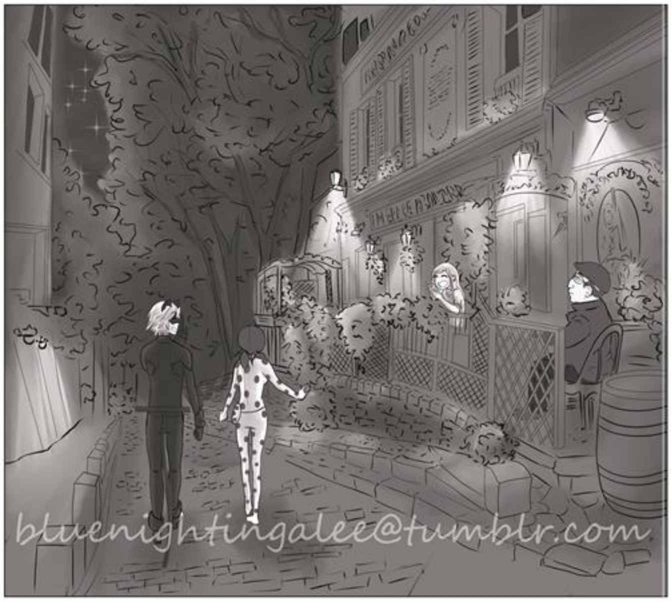

QUIET NIGHT, ISN'T IT?
WELL THEN,
YEAH. KIND OF BORING HONESTLY.
WHY DONT YOU AND I HAVE A NIGHT OUT? IT'LL BE FUN!
YOU MEAN, LIKE A DATE?
OH, WELL IF YOU INSIST, BUGABOO!
CHAT, NO
HEHE, WELL, NO. NOTHING LIKE THAT, BUT THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH TAKING A BREAK AND ENJOY THIS FREE TIME.
HMMMM......
OK
REALLY?!
I DON'T SEE WHY NOT
ANY PLACE YOU HAD IN MIND, CHATON?
....
idea
WHAT IS GOING ON IN THAT HEAD OF YOURS?
I GOT IT! BUT FIRST, WE'RE GOING TO MAKE A FEW STOPS.
OK, WHERE TO?
YOU'LL SEE!
HEY! WAIT A MINUTE!
A SUPERHERO RUNNING SEQUENCE LAYTAH'!!

bluenightingalee@tumblr.com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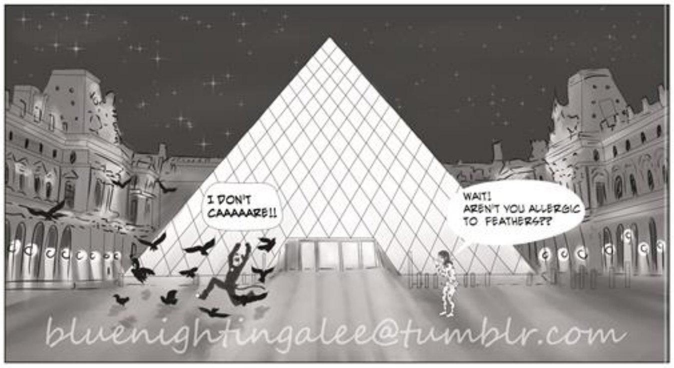
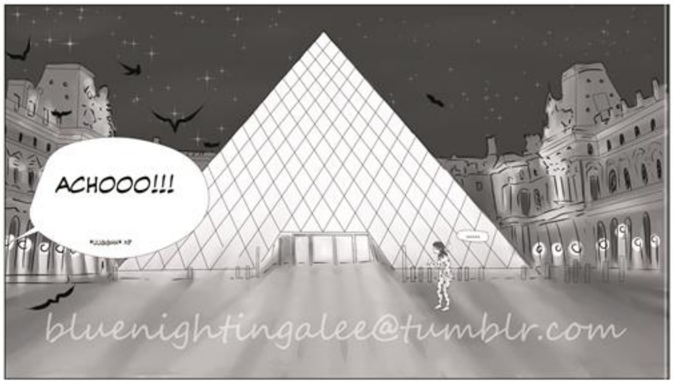

I DON'T CAAAAARE!!
WAIT! AREN'T YOU ALLERGIC TO FEATHERS??
bluenightingalee@tumblr.com



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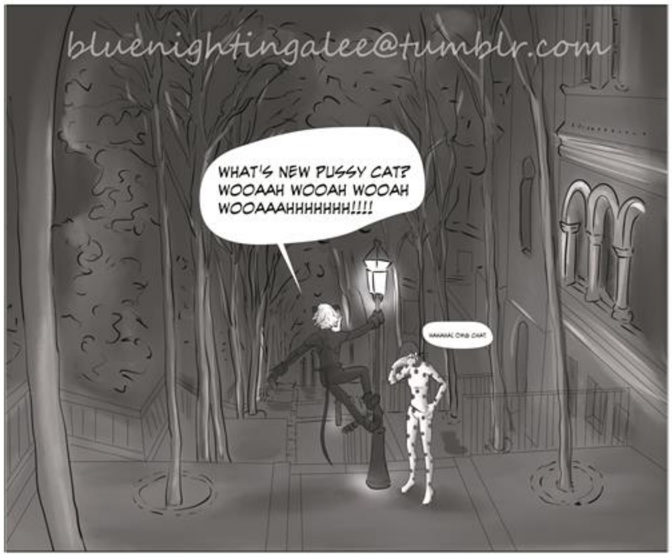
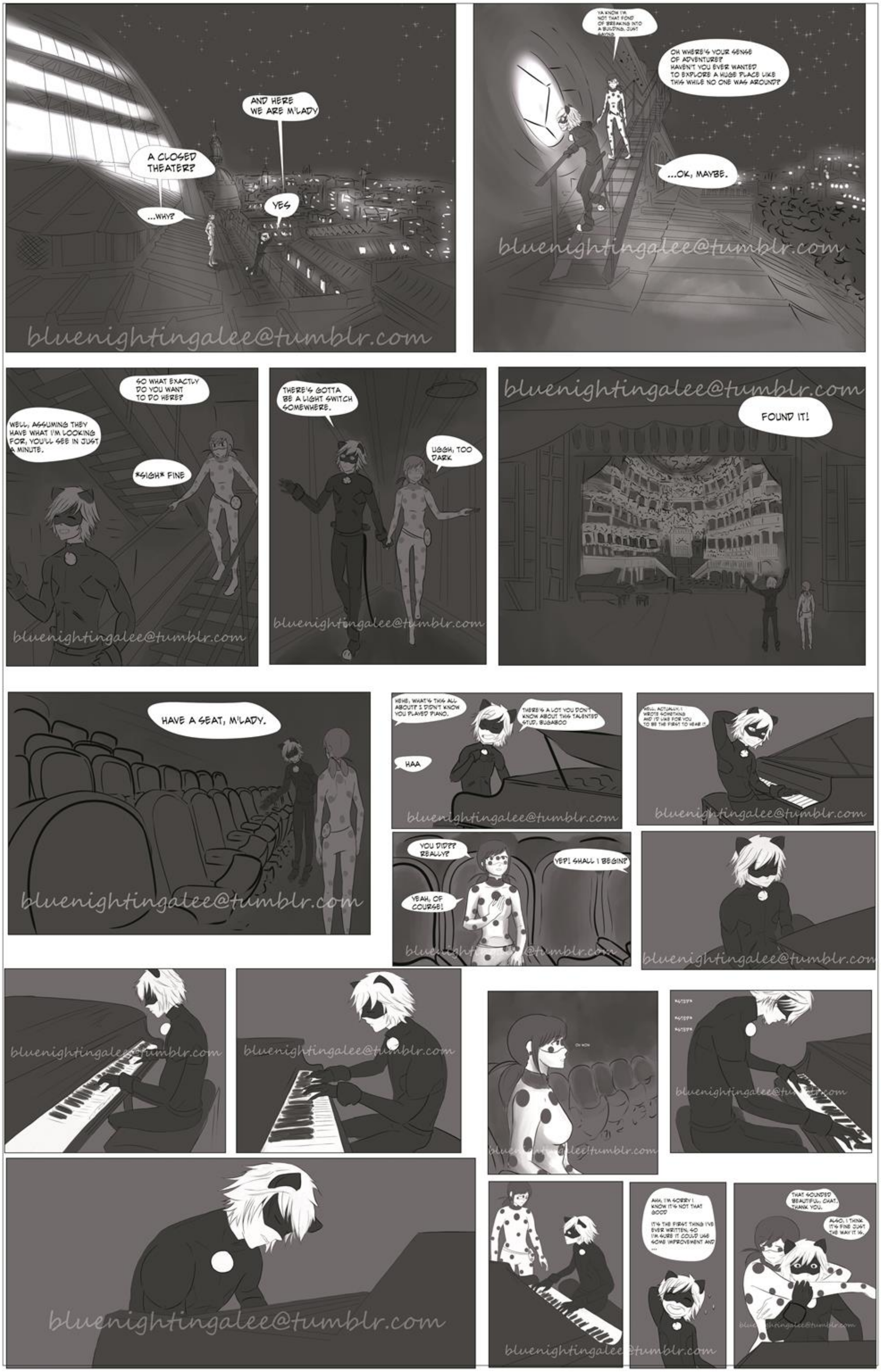
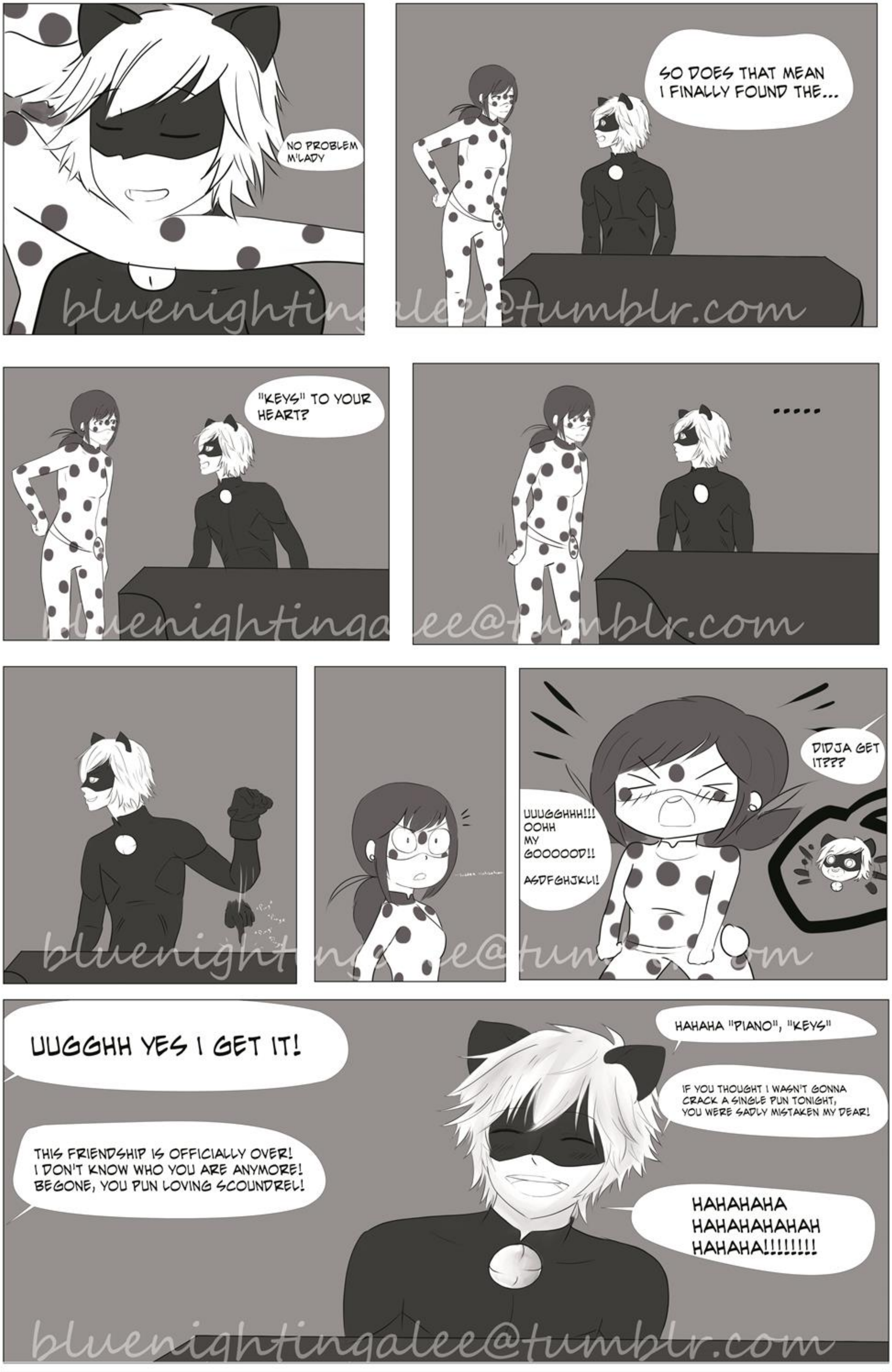

bluenightingalee@tumblr.com
WHAT'S NEW PUSSY CAT? WOOAAH WOOAH WOOAH WOOAAAHHHHHHH!!!!
HAHAHA! OMG CHAT

AFTER SOME MORE
RUNNING AROUND AND SHENANIGANS
LATER >W<


AND HERE WE ARE M'LADY
A CLOSED THEATER?
...WHY?
YES
YA KNOW I'M NOT THAT FOND OF BREAKING INTO A BUILDING, JUST SAYING
OH WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF ADVENTURE? HAVEN'T YOU EVER WANTED TO EXPLORE A HUGE PLACE LIKE THIS WHILE NO ONE WAS AROUND?
...OK, MAYBE.
SO WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU WANT TO DO HERE?
WELL, ASSUMING THEY HAVE WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR, YOU'LL SEE IN JUST A MINUTE.
SIGH FINE
THERE'S GOTTA BE A LIGHT SWITCH SOMEWHERE.
UGGH, TOO DARK
FOUND IT!
HAVE A SEAT, M'LADY.
HEHE, WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT? I DIDN'T KNOW YOU PLAYED PIANO.
THERE'S A LOT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT THIS TALENTED STUD, BUGABOO
HAA
WELL, ACTUALLY, I WROTE SOMETHING AND I'D LIKE FOR YOU TO BE THE FIRST TO HEAR IT.
YOU DID? REALLY?
YEP! SHALL I BEGIN?
YEAH, OF COURSE!
OH WOW
STEP
STEP
STEP
AHA, I'M SORRY I KNOW IT'S NOT THAT GOOD
IT'S THE FIRST THING I'VE EVER WRITTEN, SO I'M SURE IT COULD USE SOME IMPROVEMENT AND ...
THAT SOUNDED BEAUTIFUL, CHAT. THANK YOU.
ALSO, I THINK IT'S FINE JUST THE WAY IT IS.

bluenightingalee@tumblr.com


NO PROBLEM M'LADY
SO DOES THAT MEAN I FINALLY FOUND THE...
"KEYS" TO YOUR HEART?
.....
DIDJA GET IT???
UUUGGHHH!!! OOHH MY GOOOOOD!! ASDFGHJKL!
UUGGHH YES I GET IT!
HAHAHA "PIANO", "KEYS"
IF YOU THOUGHT I WASN'T GONNA CRACK A SINGLE PUN TONIGHT, YOU WERE SADLY MISTAKEN MY DEAR!
THIS FRIENDSHIP IS OFFICIALLY OVER! I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE ANYMORE! BEGONE, YOU PUN LOVING SCOUNDREL!
HAHAHAHA HAHAHAHAHAH HAHAHA!!!!!!!!

bluenightingalee@tumblr.com

THE BONUS AND FINAL PAGE WILL BE POSTED ON MY TUMBLR

A Young Hero

Today's akuma had a vendetta against Gabriel Agreste.

Apparently M. Agreste had seen it fit to fire a company executive this morning. His personal assistant, Nathalie Sancoeur, said the exchange had only lasted sixty seconds — just long enough for M. Agreste to tell the man why he was being fired, give him instructions to clean his office immediately, and hand him back the golden name plate that had already been stripped from his door. Not even ten minutes later, Gabriel's company building was on complete lockdown while the akuma stalked the halls searching for Gabriel Agreste to get his revenge.

Chat Noir only knew about it because Nathalie had called him in the middle of class to update him on the situation. So he transformed, called Ladybug, and told her that unfortunately, Gabriel Agreste was going to need some hasty protection detail before this new villain seriously harmed him.

"We've instructed all employees to lock themselves in their offices and take cover," Nathalie explained to the two superheroes as the elevator halted on the top floor. Ladybug and Chat Noir kept their weapons drawn and eyed the vents and windows while Nathalie led them to Gabriel's office. "M. Agreste is also remaining in his office, but so far there's been no sign of the akuma."

"He's probably hiding in the building somewhere," Ladybug frowned. "One of us will go track him down while the other keeps an eye on M. Agreste. I'll—"

"I'll watch M. Agreste," Chat Noir cut in. "You go find the akuma and call me when you find him."

"Are you sure? He's not the easiest person to deal with."

"Trust me, I'm well aware," Chat Noir chuckled humorlessly. "Don't worry. I'll make sure he stays safe."

Ladybug squeezed his hand before promising to call him as soon as she found something. Nathalie led Chat Noir into Gabriel's office and locked the door behind him. It wasn't often that Gabriel worked in his company office, but judging by the way he was still hunched over his work without noticing Chat Noir's entrance probably meant that today was a heavy work day. Chat Noir cleared his throat and waited for Gabriel to boredly look up from his desk and regard him as if he were nothing but an employee. "Ah. Chat Noir. I assumed you would be here soon."

"The akuma in the building is after you, so I'm here to make sure you stay safe while Ladybug tries to track him down," Chat Noir explained.

"I find that highly unnecessary," Gabriel explained, gesturing to his office. "As you can see, I'm perfectly protected in my office. The commotion might actually allow me to get some work done."

"With all due respect, M. Agreste," Chat Noir said sternly, "the last time you said you didn't need protection you almost jumped off the roof of a building. I think I'll decide whether you need to be looked after."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at him — the same way he tended to do whenever he spoke back to him as Adrien and surprised him into a brief silence — and waved his hand towards the couch resting against the windows. "Then by all means, amuse yourself."

Chat Noir clicked his staff to shorten it back into a baton and clip it to his belt before he purposefully stepped on the cushions of the couch and sat on the back of it, staring at Gabriel and daring him to say something about it. Gabriel merely rolled his eyes in distaste and returned to his work while Chat Noir kept his ears up and his gaze on the windows.

"How old are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"How old are you?" Gabriel repeated impatiently. "You don't seem old enough to be disrespecting adults in such a manner."

"I'm not a child and you're not an adult," Chat Noir said. "Right now you're a civilian and I'm the only person that can keep you safe. I'm asking you to listen to me so that you won't be injured. And to your question, I'm fifteen."

Gabriel hummed. "Same age as my son. How fitting. I believe I told you you remind me of him."

Chat Noir shifted in his seat and remembered their fight with Jackady. "I remember."

"You're awfully young to be assuming the role of a superhero with such authority over me. Does your family know what you do?"

Chat Noir snorted and kept his gaze down on his baton, waiting for Ladybug's call. "It goes against superhero ethics. Didn't you ever read American comic books?"

Gabriel lifted a brow in amusement. "No. My son does. He's very passionate about what you do."

"Is he?" Chat Noir grinned.

"You and Ladybug were on the news after an attack last week, and he seemed rather excited to show me the footage the news stations were running. But he stormed out the room when I dared suggest I wouldn't spectate such foolishness. No son of mine would ever masquerade around the city. Not at his age when he was so reckless and irresponsible. I won't pretend to condone it for anyone else's child. I assume he got defensive because he greatly respects your efforts."

"Or maybe he feels like you don't respect him," Chat Noir muttered, hoping the bitterness in his voice wasn't telling. "That you'd stop him from doing something or believing in something that was important."

"Your job is *dangerous*," Gabriel explained, his lips pursing in that patronizing way that made Adrien dread those mornings when he'd meet with his father to discuss all the tutoring sessions he'd missed. "There are other more important things to be doing than risking one's life."

"You seem to think that," Chat Noir scowled. "Others wouldn't agree."

"Ah yes. I assume you're among the *others,* correct?"

"Yes," Chat Noir stated, hoping his voice would strip all the humor off his father's tongue. "I find risking my life for the sake of people who need me the most important thing I could be doing. Your son seems to agree. Maybe you should respect that opinion as opposed to chalking it up as some childish delusion."

In a surprising reaction, Gabriel's shoulders shook with laughter as he clicked his pen closed and shut the folder of sketches he'd been marking up. "I pity your parents," he chuckled. "They don't even know enough to properly worry about you."

Chat Noir snorted at the irony. "I happen to think that's a good thing. Would you want to know if I was your son?"

Gabriel pursed his lips and took a few seconds to answer. "I suppose you have a point."

"Don't worry about my parents," Chat Noir replied. "They're none the wiser and it's best to just keep it that way."

Gabriel folded his hands and rested his chin on them. "I have this sense that you don't particularly like that you're here watching over me."

"I never said that," Chat Noir said quietly. "Value judgements like that aren't important in situations like this. Your life has value and I'm going to do everything it takes to make sure nothing happens to you. Even if it means getting hurt in the process. Ladybug and I didn't take our decisions to become heroes lightly, and it just annoys me when people try to suggest that we're purposefully being reckless. It's so much more than that."

There was no replicating the sick moment in his stomach where Ladybug had asked him to forget about saving his father in favor of handling the akuma first. It was logical, and hours later when his heart had calmed, he recognized it for the intelligent decision that it was. But watching the news after the fact and seeing that horrifying moment where his father was only seconds away from pitching himself off a roof before Ladybug's magic had brought him back to his senses was one that still haunted him. Getting Nathalie's phone call today made that feeling punch straight through him, and it wasn't often that running into an akuma fight had ever made him *panic*.

Gabriel was shaking his head at him, rolling his tongue in his cheek while looking like he was finally struggling with his words. "You shouldn't have such a burden on your shoulders," he muttered. "It's ridiculous to place such a responsibility on a child."

Chat Noir shrugged. "Maybe. But you have a son. I'm sure he's worried sick about you and praying that you'll come home safe when this is all over. If I can help make that happen, then all of this is worth it."

Gabriel smiled softly and Chat Noir was surprised to see the sincerity reach his eyes and warm his expression in a way he only ever used to see when his mother was still around. "I suppose this is what my son sees in you."

"Still foolish?" Chat Noir smirked.

"Atrociously so. But I suppose that's the appeal despite how much I cannot seem to understand it."

"I guess that's the closest thing to a compliment I'll get from you."

"Make no mistake, boy," Gabriel began. "I'm not ungrateful for your services. This city has been turning into a ridiculous circus show since the appearance of this Papillon character and you two have been the only people standing in the way of that reality. But I know there are parents looking up to you both and begging you to value your lives."

His father wasn't a man easily bothered. About the only time in recent history that Chat Noir could remember his father looking shaken was the day he burst into his room after that akuma attack and hugged him as if he had only just realized how close he had been to not being able to see his son again. It was brief, as were most of his father's moments of vulnerability ever since his mother disappeared, but Chat Noir was an expert on picking up on them despite how fleeting they were. This was another one of those moments, as if he were imploring him to do the safe and sane thing and give the responsibility of his miraculous to someone else. How odd that he'd feel so strongly that he'd request it of someone who was essentially a stranger to him.

Chat Noir swallowed and was about to respond before his baton lit up as a call from Ladybug came in. He gave Gabriel an apologetic look before jumping off the couch and walking towards the windows. "What's up?"

"*I've got the akuma cornered in the twelfth floor employee lounge*," Ladybug said, sounding out of breath. "*I need you down here right now!*"

"Okay," he said immediately. "I'll be there as soon as I can." After Chat Noir hung up, he flipped his baton upside down, clipped off the attachment at the very end of it, and tossed it at Gabriel. "Treat that like a panic button. If you press it, I'll get a signal sent back to my baton so that I know you're in danger. In the meantime, keep your doors and windows locked, draw those shades, and don't leave this room under any circumstances. We'll come for you when the coast is clear."

Gabriel stared down at the panic button in his hands and slipped it into his pocket. "I suppose that's the best option. I'll need to work on creating a security system for the company building that's comparable to the one in my own home."

"I have no doubt you'll manage it," Chat Noir chuckled. "I have to go. But please stay safe."

"Hold on!"

Chat Noir stopped in his tracks and spun around to watch Gabriel standing up from his desk chair and bracing his hands on his desk. "Thank you," he said. "As I said. I appreciate all you do for this city and for myself." He paused, swallowed a lump in his throat, and sighed. "Just make sure you come home to your father at the end of the day."

His last words were almost whispered, as if he were reluctant to even say them. But they permeated through the room and left an ache in Chat Noir's chest that made him set his jaw and nod with strength. "I promise."

Chat Noir kept his eyes in Gabriel as he slipped from the office, his ring feeling heavy in his hands, and raced downstairs before locking the door behind him.

-Breeeliss

butaime 2017♥
butaime '17

ORIGIN

Prologue

Paris, the frontier where fashion and technology meet to come together in a seamless thread. This is the City of LED Lights and Love, where streets are circuits in a motherboard spread as far as the eye can see and the people are bits of data that are constantly being shuttled back and forth, day and night carrying out individual commands to make the entire processing unit—the city—run flawlessly.

I was one of those bits of data once, carrying out pre-programmed commands that weren't my own. But then something happened and took me off course—took me off the grid entirely— and put me on a new one, an incomplete one; one that I got to forge myself bit by bit and become Chat Noir, defender of Paris.

***

"And cut! Great job everybody, let's take a fifteen and then meet back here for the final set."

Bodies that were once lifeless as statues surged back to life. Everything was movement and sound, rushes of color and glints of metal. Models strolled off set for lunch, interns pushed racks of clothes and sunk under the weight of boxes filled to the brim with accessories, and the film crew chatted as they prepared for the upcoming set.

Adrien let out a sigh and allowed his muscles to relax, releasing the tense position he'd been holding for the past fifteen minutes. The last set had been difficult. Either the tech hadn't been working, someone had blinked, wasn't smiling wide enough, or wasn't supposed to be smiling *at all*. He was glad it was over.

He pulled out his phone and tapped the face of his smartphone. The holographic screen sprung to life and hovered a few inches from the glass face. The digital numbers of the clock glowed big and white: 21:02. Three more hours, just three more hours until the end of the day.

Soon.

Once fashion week was over they'd all have a breather. Then, he'd be able to do whatever he wanted. At least for a little bit.

"Did you hear about the latest protest?" Adrien turned his head towards a passing tech guy talking with one of the models. "This cyborg problem is really getting out of control."

"Ugh, tell me about it," the model scoffed, curling her perfect red lips into a grimace. "I once had to stand next to one on the metro and I couldn't stop staring at her metal eye. It looked so…*wrong*. Like, what if I looked at her weird she'd attack me."

Their conversation faded as they passed, but what Adrien had heard left a sour feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was more and more common to see someone with a prosthetic or some kind of replacement to make up for their disability, but because they didn't look one-hundred percent human, they were treated with constant fear and wariness at best and as less-than-human at worst. He didn't know much since he had no experience with them himself, but he still couldn't help but feel like how people looked at them was wrong.

"Adrien!" his head whipped up to see his father's assistant making a beeline for him. He swallowed a curse and smiled.

"Yes, Nathalie?" he greeted, hoping for once she was about to tell him his father had called him home so he could go to bed.

"The newest prop has just arrived," she began, either not noticing Adrien deflating or choosing to overlook it. "You will be using them for the next set to promote your father's primary line for fashion week, so I figured it would be best for you to get an early peek at it so you would be comfortable during the runway show."

Adrien stared at her, a crooked grin slowly stretching onto his face. "Awesome, where is it?"

She led him to a table where a short, thin silver cylinder lay. It was no bigger than a USB stick and about twice the width of a pen.

"It's…small," he commented, feeling slightly underwhelmed.

"For convenience. Although it is best not to judge by appearances, Adrien. If you will look near the base, there is a button that you can press."

Indeed there was. It blended in with the rest of the baton, barely outlined at the edges. He pressed it, a barely audible *click* sounding and the baton suddenly shot out, growing longer in his hand until it was nearly even with the top of his head.

"Whoa, that's pretty cool. What's it going to be used for?"

"They're still in development. Originally, they were meant to be a tool for self defense, but they were pulled at the last minute because PR decided selling weapons, even if they were for a good cause, wouldn't be an appropriate image for the Agreste brand. For now it is just a stylish prop."

"How were they seen as a weapon?" Obviously, it could be used to beat someone away, but so could a lot of other things that were already being sold.

"There's a taser function," she informed him, pointing out another small button that blended in with the metalwork. "Press that and the ends become charged just enough to immobilize an attacker and allow the victim to run away."

"I think that's a smart idea," he muttered.

"Be careful, Adrien," she warned as she watched him experimentally twirl it around. "They are still in development so they can be—"

His finger brushed the taser button and the ends popped with green sparks. Adrien cried out and dropped it.

"…Temperamental." Nathalie sighed. "Please be more careful. We are very close to our deadline; we would not want to have any accidents. Now come along, we have a shoot to finish."

"Don't worry about it, I'm fine. I'll be careful," he promised, bending down and picking the baton up. It was still warm in his hand. He shrugged and leaned it against the wall near the rest of the equipment and followed her back on set.

***

Fire.

That's what people kept screaming; that a fire had broken out on set and was now engulfing the entire space. It had happened so suddenly, he still wasn't sure what had caused it. But now the fire was spreading like an insatiable monster, running rampant and devouring everything in its path, leaving behind only ashes and smoke.

Everything hurt. The pain was indescribable as a single brush against his skin had him screaming. When a section of the roof had come down, it had rained around Adrien and knocked him to the ground. Burning metal had him trapped by the legs and he wasn't sure what hurt more, being crushed underneath all the weight of the fallout or slowly being roasted alive.

He felt tears gather in his eyes and dry up before they had the chance to fall down his face. He hadn't particularly disliked his life, but he wished he'd been able to do more. He didn't know what he would've done…gotten away from his father's influence, gone and done something that actually made him excited about his future and his life…

But this was how it ended. In a fiery blaze. Maybe it was the toxic fumes of the smoke, or the fact that he was dying, but he laughed. It came out as a strangled cough that made his lungs and throat scream instead.

Shadows gathered in around him, dancing at the edges of his vision. He felt like he was floating and it was so easy to forget the pain now that it was starting to fade. He couldn't feel his legs at all anymore. He could hear a faint pounding coming from somewhere, but he couldn't really tell where from. Not that it mattered.

He welcomed the quiet darkness when it fell, letting him slip away from the painful, burning world and into oblivion.

***

The first thing Adrien noticed was how clean it smelled. It wasn't a pleasant clean either, more like cleaning-chemicals-clean. The next thing he noticed was the dull murmer of conversations from somewhere that was both close and far away, and a steady beeping next to his ears. It took an enormous amount of effort, but he managed to crack open his eyes. Half of his vision was dark, like the world around him was a painting and the right half was just a black void.

He glanced around the room—a hospital room—clean and white and sterile. The only bit of color was the flower bouquet adorning his bedside table with a *Get Well Soon* card written in a fancy style of handwriting he didn't recognize.

He was in a hospital. He was alive.

But…how was that possible?

Slowly, he lifted a hand to his face, wincing when his wrapped fingers met soft gauze bandages and his skin underneath sorely protested under his light touch. The tips of his fingers felt something covering his right eye—an eyepatch.

His gaze drifted down to his body. He was in a hospital gown, but everything visible was wrapped in bandages. His shoulder and thigh ached. He went to rub the pain out of his arm and froze when his hand went straight to his ribs.

Ever so slowly, he felt up to his shoulder and stopped when he felt his arm end in a stump.

What?

His hand went down to the pain in his thigh and found that it ended in a stump midway down.

His arm and leg were gone. He *only half of his limbs*.

He couldn't breathe. And whatever breaths he could take didn't feel like they did any good, like the air was just escaping through his lungs. He felt dizzy, his chest ached. He knew needed to calm down, but he couldn't bring himself to do that. Not when he was *literally in pieces*.

His eye darted to his bedside table to a nurse button. He practically slammed his hand down on it and not a minute later, a nurse came running into his room.

"Adrien, is everything okay?" she asked breathlessly, eyes roaming over his body to try to find the problem.

"Wh-where's Nathalie? My father? Please…" his request died on his tongue. He didn't know what he was going to ask, he just needed something—*someone* to hold onto. He was drowning and needed a lifeline, something, *anything* familiar.

The nurse looked at him with so much pity that he thought he was going to be sick.

"Adrien…I'm sorry. But we don't know when they will be coming. Your father's assistant informed us he's a very busy man and he will try to come when he can. I'm so sorry…can I get you anything?"

He shook his head. "I just need to rest," he said, his voice thick with unshed tears. The nurse nodded understandingly and then mercifully left him alone.

Once the door clicked shut, he let the tears fall. Of course his father wasn't here. *Of course* his father would make him wait until it was convenient for him, never mind his only son almost died and was lying alone in a hospital room.

He let the tears spill over and slide down his cheeks, just a little bit, until he was suddenly sobbing without control.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, unraveling into a damp, snotty mess, but the tears only ended when he became too exhausted and fell asleep.

Gabriel Agreste finally deigned to show his face several days later and even then, the visit was kept short. One look at Adrien and his father's lips had thinned into a straight, tight line on his face and his icy blue eyes seemed to freeze over completely. Few words exchanged, clinical, cold, and to the point. It reminded Adrien of one of his business deals.

The plan was that he would be receiving many surgeries to give him prosthetics, a replacement eye, and improvements to the computer implants now in his brain to help it function normally. Adrien had to look completely normal if the company and his father's career were to survive. Then his father had left without a second glance.

Adrien swallowed, his throat aching dully.

You're my most important asset, Adrien. If you're like this, then what use are you to me?

The words had hit him harder than a slap to the face. His insides grew cold as he attempted to deny the hurt he he was feeling deep inside his chest.

His father was right anyway. If anyone learned of his new cyborg status, then the company would be finished.

And of course, his father cared more about the company than his only son.

Adrien sighed, his lungs weakly protesting at the movement. He wasn't surprised by his father's treatment. He was an absent father, at best. But the rejection still stung.

All Gabriel Agreste saw was a broken doll, forever stuck with chips in the once-perfect porcelain.

***

The rehabilitation was long and hard, especially since Adrien's father was pushing for him to finish as fast as possible so he could return to modelling. Thankfully, the team of doctors, surgeons, and therapists didn't take the orders to heart and were patient and supportive of him during his recovery. He really didn't think he'd be able to get through the struggle without them.

His new arm and leg were made of a light-weight metal that hardly put any strain on him after he built up his strength. He was given an eye that looked exactly like his biological one, the same color shade of green and everything. The only difference was that it connected to the hardware in his brain and acted like an internal computer.. He was able to pull up newsfeeds, videos, maps, e-mail…really anything that could be done with a normal computer, and all it required was for him to blink and think about it. He would have thought it was pretty cool if it wasn't such a glaring reminder that his life would never be the same.

For months, Adrien attended physical therapy, getting used to normal everyday activities that his body no longer could do such as walking and dressing himself. Anything that required movement from his arm or leg was a struggle, but he fought through it. He had to constantly remind himself that he wasn't doing this for his father or for the company, but for himself. He wasn't about to sit around in a wheelchair and feel sorry for himself after losing so much. He could overcome this so he'd be able to work towards his goals—whatever those turned out to be.

During the time that he was gone from modeling, his father told the press that he was taking a break for education. It was an easy lie, especially once Gabriel Agreste had let it slip that the schooling was related to taking over the family business. The press ate it up and didn't once bother him during the months of rehab.

Nearly a year later, Adrien was back in the studio, make-up artists carefully covering up any and all flaws they could find. All of the outfits he'd been given to model were long-sleeved or had jackets, and he never wore shorts or cut-off pants. He was told he would either be wearing gloves or taking shots where his hand would remain unseen. His metal arm and leg remained hidden from sight, and no one commented on his new "condition". It was as if the fire had never happened.

But it had happened.

That was one thing that bothered him more than anything. It made him feel like what he'd gone through was nothing to these people and he had to act the same way as before. The facade that he was still the perfect boy from a year ago felt wrong. It was a lie…and no one would know.

But at the end of the day when it was just him alone at home, he'd stand in front of the mirror and stare at the scarred flesh where it met the metal of his new limbs and be reminded just how different everything was now.

He knew he was the same person and he was still good, the circuitry in his brain hadn't fried the good parts of him, contrary to popular belief that cyborgs were dangerous, unfeeling creatures who wore human skin. And yet…it still made him feel slightly sick when he looked at his arm and leg or whenever a popped up in his vision becuase it was a cruel reminder that he now had no chance of earning his father's love.

One night after he came home, he paced around for an hour before he decided he needed to get out. He needed to do something for himself, something that had nothing to do with his father or the company. Despite his room being bigger than some apartments in Paris, he felt stifled. It was late at night, nearing midnight. However… it would be a problem if people figured out that Adrien Agreste was sneaking out to prowl around Paris at late hours, *especially* if the news made it back to his father.

So he threw open his closet and hunted for the darkest, most inconspicuous clothes he owned. A moment later he was dressed in a pair of black active pants with the words CHAT NOIR spelled out in gray lettering down his right leg, a black, short-sleeved hoodie, boots, and a glove for his left hand.

He stared at himself in the mirror, but more specifically, his shiny metal arm that stood out in the open for all to see. He didn't want to cover it up. That was all he did every day, hide who he was.

If he was going out and he was going to clear his head, then he had to be himself.

But he still had to hide his identity.

He searched around his closet until the crosshairs in his vision locked onto a pair of black and gray goggles and his black cat-ear headphones. His father had given him a hard time for the headphones since they weren't "normal", but he'd kept them *because* they annoyed his father. It was a small victory.

He gave himself a satisfied look before turning his attention to the next problem at hand: he needed to get out of the house without being spotted.

Out of the corner of his eye, a red arrow pointed offscreen to something he couldn't see. He turned his head, following it until his crosshairs centered on a sleek, silver baton leaning against the far wall.

His stomach churned as he approached the instrument and delicately picked it up. It'd been reported that the cause of the fire had been narrowed down to a faulty prototype that had been left too close to an electrical box. It had sparked and blown the circuits, creating an electrical fire that had quickly spread. Before anyone knew it, the whole room had been engulfed in flames.

He'd put the baton next to the electrical box. He'd caused the fire.

He twirled it in his hands thoughtfully, frowning.

It was a freak accident. It's fine now.

Gripping the baton, he crossed over to the window and gazed out at the city.

The streets were brightly lit with white, clean energy and created a zig zagging grid as far as he could see. Not a soul was out, the streets were completely abandoned.

Before he could think twice about his crazy, half-baked plan, he was out the window and sliding down the baton like a fireman pole. About halfway down the baton started to tilt to the side and before he could do anything about it, he'd found himself lying on the pavement. Other than a few bruises he'd know would show up later though, he was fine. So he hopped up, dusted himself off, and made his way into the city.

***

Adrien kept to the quieter streets and away from the touristy areas just so he could drink in the silence of the night. In the time that he'd left the manor, he'd only run into the occasional drunk stumbling his way home and a couple leaning tiredly on one another. The air smelled of fallen leaves and rain from the storm that had passed through earlier that day and the crisp, cool air energized him despite his previous fatigue and kept him moving quickly through the sleeping streets.

He'd never realized how beautiful his city was before since he was always being shuttled around in a car, speeding from one place to another and then he'd been in and out of the hospital for the past year. He'd never actually gotten time to discover the city he'd spent his entire life in. But now that he actually had the time and ability to *actually* get out, he was seeing Paris in a brand new light that had nothing to do with the clean-energy LED street lamps.

The peaceful silence couldn't last forever though. It was suddenly shattered when a scream that made Adrien's hairs rise on the back of his neck pierced the night. He wasn't thinking as he rushed to follow the sound. As he neared the source of the commotion, he started to hear other voices too.

"Please, just go back inside. We'll be in in a minute!" a woman's voice begged. Adrien could tell she was on the verge of tears.

A man's rougher, deeper voice snapped in response, "Yeah right! Don't think I don't know what yer tryin' ta do! Yer not leavin' tha' easily!" He sounded drunk.

Adrien rounded a corner and nearly ran into someone's fist.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, immediately dropping to all fours. Above him stood a burly man wearing a sour expression on his face. His cheeks were flushed and his dark eyes were now focused on Adrien in a seething glare. Adrien glanced behind him and saw the previous targets of the man's anger: a middle-aged woman and a kid probably no older than ten. They were clutching at each other, shaking, their wide eyes on him as well.

The man towering above him growled. "Get outta 'ere, kid. This ain't yer business."

Adrien stood up slowly, slipping his hand into his pocket where his baton rested. He glanced back at the woman and boy, taking in their terrified expressions, then back at the man.

"Please," the woman whispered, "Please, go on. We'll be fine."

"I don't think you will be," Adrien said slowly, his grip on the baton tightening. He brushed his thumb against it, feeling the grooves of the button he was itching to press.

"Don' stick yer nose inta busness that ain't yer own, cyborg scum!" the drunk man roared, lurching forward, swinging his meaty fist at Adrien.

He dodged, whipping out his baton in a flash of silver just in time to block the man's fist. The kid and his mom cried out in surprise.

"Get out of here, go!" he didn't wait to see if they obeyed as he moved to block another punch from the man.

Clang, thud. Clang, clang, CLANG.

Back and forth they moved, the man's movements sluggish and sloppy but full of brute force as he attacked Adrien over and over, forcing the teen to play defense.

There has to be some way to beat him.

Suddenly his vision lit up with little red dots. The words ANALYZING ATTACK PATTERN paired with two arrows rotating in a patient circle appeared at the bottom of his vision. Then the dots lit up green and popped up: DODGE LEFT.

What's is this…?

That's all he allowed himself to wonder before dodging just in time to avoid the man as he threw himself at Adrien. The drunk's momentum sent him staggering and crashing into the brick wall behind Adrien.

He felt a grin tug at his lips. Okay, this was going to fun.

He made quick work of the man after that, paying attention to the instructions rolling across the bottom of his vision as his eye analyzed his attacker's movements and predicted a way to beat him.

It was less than a minute later before Adrien finished off the guy with a quick jab to the man's side with his baton's taser. Electric green lit up the alleyway before fading and leaving them in the dark once again. The man lay unconscious on the road and Adrien didn't feel a hint of remorse leaving him there as he hurried out of the alley. He hoped the mother and her son were very far away by now.

He wasn't expecting to meet their shocked gazes right around the corner. Well, the boy was staring up at him with more awe and wonder than shock.

"Are you a superhero?!" the boy demanded after a second of surprised silence had passed.

"I…um…"

"Thank you, young man," the mother said, any previous tension from her face gone, replaced with a soft look of gratitude and relief. "Really, you didn't have to step in for us like that."

"But I wanted to," Adrien quickly said. "I had to help, that was a tough situation you were in and I couldn't just sit back and watch."

"Well, we're very grateful to you. With it being this late at night, I didn't expect anyone to show up. I'd already resigned myself to Jean's cruelty."

Adrien inclined his head to her, smiling softly. "If you don't mind me prying ma'am…can I ask why you two were out here so late?"

The mother sighed and placed a hand on her son's shoulder. "We were trying to leave. I figured late at night was the best time to since Jean usually is…asleep by now. Trying to leave during the day would have been impossible."

"I see…Well, I shouldn't keep you, then. He might wake up soon," Adrien said taking a step back.

"Chat Noir wait!"

He froze, blinking in confusion. "What did you call me?" he asked, staring at the little boy.

"Chat Noir!" the boy exclaimed, pointing to Adrien's sweatpants, where the words CHAT NOIR were clearly visible. "That's your superhero name, isn't it? Thanks for saving me and my mom! I'm going to be a superhero like you when I grow up!"

Adrien felt his cheeks heat up at the unexpected praise. He didn't have the heart to tell the boy he wasn't a superhero. It was then that he noticed the boy was wearing a Batman t-shirt.

The mother laughed, slightly embarrassed. "Forgive him, he's going through a bit of a phase right now."

Adrien shook his head, grinning. "It's no problem. I don't blame him, I love heroes too."

"Chat Noir, Chat Noir! Can I see your baton?!" the boy asked, pointing to the weapon in Adrien's metal hand. Adrien's grin only grew and he nodded, kneeling next to the boy and hand his staff over, shrinking it down so it was barely longer than the boy's arm.

"Wow, so cool! And do you know what's even cooler?!"

"What's that?" Adrien asked, chuckling.

"You're a cyborg! Everyone says all cyborgs are bad, but that's not true! You saved me and my mom AND you look super cool doing it! I'm gonna tell *everyone* that Chat Noir's a cyborg hero!"

"O-Oh, you don't have to do that…"

But the boy shook his head, not having any of Adrien's protests. "I'm gonna be your biggest fan now!"

“W-well…okay then. I’m glad to have you as my number one fan.” He extended his metal arm for a fist bump, which the boy enthusiastically returned.

Adrien insisted on escorting them to a nearby relative’s apartment, she apparently had a sister who lived close by, before bidding them goodbye and turning around to finally head home.

Chat Noir, huh?

He rather liked the sound of that.

***

Epilogue

So that’s how I became Chat Noir, hero of Paris and the face of the Cyborg Equality cause. I ended up going out every night after that, looking for people to save. As a masked hero, I feel free, alive, and like I’m actually using my second chance at life wisely.

I used to be a bit of data, carrying out commands my father wanted for my life. But then I became Chat Noir and it took me off of my previous course, took me off the grid entirely as Adrien Agreste, and put me on a new one, an incomplete one. This path is one that I get to forge myself bit by bit as Chat Noir, defender of Paris.

-megupic

NEWS
LADYBUG
SAVED 12 AT LOUVRE
BISTRO
MISS ROSE
Pixie
CODE
ZAG
CHAI-CHINO

Lock and Key

Adrien's 15th birthday had been pretty much a completely unmitigated disaster. Still, over the past year, things had been looking up, and maybe he was naïve enough to believe his 16th would be better.

It started off great, at least. He woke up to a warm, quiet room, full of delicious smells, and found that someone had delivered breakfast into his room while he was sleeping. There was a fantastic spread laid out on his coffee table; fruits and pastries and juices and coffee and his favorite cheese soufflé--far too much for him to eat all on his own. Plagg was happy to help.

As he pushed away the last of his breakfast, he stretched and reflected on the past year. For all outward appearances, nothing had really changed. His dad still enforced a strict curfew, Nino was only allowed by on rare occasions, his mother was still gone, and he was no closer to confessing his feelings to Ladybug. He was still weighed down with Chinese and fencing and photo shoots and school and superhero duties--but despite all that, he felt like everything had changed. As Chat Noir, he'd had a glorious chance to taste freedom and try it on for himself, and he'd grown into his role as the city's favorite cavalier. He'd made more friends than he'd ever had before, been to school, seen and done things he never would have imagined beyond the walls of his bedroom and the anime on his tv. He'd grown into himself.

Adrien had been sure to secure his father's approval ahead of time, but he had the whole day to himself and permission to invite over as many guests as he wanted. It was the one day of the year that he got these freedoms, and he planned to make the most of it. As he dressed and brushed his teeth, he texted his friends. Nino was the obvious first, then Chloé, as she was his oldest friend and, moreover, likely to have her phone in her hand at all times. Maybe Alya was free, too; when she and Chloé could stop fighting, they all got along great. And Marinette, too; she was slowly inching out of her shell, and Adrien sometimes saw glimpses of confidence and wit that made him think of Ladybug and smile; with echoes of his own best friend in her, he loved hanging out. And Kim, who was the absolute life of any party, and Rose, who brought joy wherever she went.

But when Adrien stretched out on his couch, full and clean and fully dressed, his phone was silent. Not a single person had texted him back.

He tried to not let it get to him. It was still early, after all. Maybe they weren't awake yet.

Adrien tapped his fingers restlessly on the arm of the couch. He wanted to go somewhere, do something, hang out with his friends. It was his *birthday*; he wasn't going to spend the day sitting around in his room, playing video games or watching television or wasting hours on the Internet. Not alone. Not today. Not again.

He got up after a few more moments' consideration. Maybe he could talk someone into letting him use the car. Adrien could imagine himself zipping around the city, showing up unannounced to rope them into a surprise adventure. *Come on, dude! It's my birthday. Get dressed, you're coming with me.*

Alright, so the car wasn't that big. He'd be able to pick up maybe two people. Still, he let himself have that fantasy, and he slipped his shoes on.

"Come on, Plagg," Adrien called, holding his jacket open for Plagg to slide in and hide. He approached the door with a spring in his step, and turned the handle.

Locked.

He pulled on the handle again. It was *definitely* locked; he wasn't mistaken. *What the…?* He frowned and crossed over to the other door, next to the bathroom, but that was locked, too.

He rapped on the door, feeling a little foolish for knocking on the wrong side. But still there was no response. No one was in the hallway. He tried again, pounding on the door until his knuckles were sore. "Father?" he called. "Nathalie?"

Adrien felt distinctly uncomfortable, and most of all, *betrayed*, as he sank to his knees and sat down. His father wouldn't lie to him. He had woken up, excited for the day, but now it felt like a trick, to keep him distracted from whatever was really happening.

"What's going on, Plagg?" he asked, as the kwami poked his head out.

Plagg frowned, whiskers twitching in irritation. "I dunno, kid. But, you know, there's more than one way out of here."

"Yeah," Adrien replied sourly. "There's *two* doors."

"Okay, smart mouth, I meant the window."

"Oh. You're right. Plagg, transform me!"

--

As a whole, Parisians hadn't gotten used to running into Ladybug or Chat Noir on the street; it was still a rare and exciting occasion. But the sight of one of them no longer incited the mass panic that it had before. After a while, they got used to the fact that, sometimes, a hero would show up *without* danger on their heels. They looked to be teenagers, after all, and sometimes they just liked to hang out, take a walk, visit some fans, get a free lunch.

Today seemed to be one of those days, Nino noticed, seeing Chat Noir down the street. He was crouched down, talking to a pair of little kids, one of whom was conversing animatedly back, and the other of whom was hiding behind their parent.

Nino was only a block away from Alya's house; he was on his way there, in fact, to pick up some supplies, but seeing Chat Noir so close gave him another reason to light a fire under his feet.

Chat looked up as he felt someone pass by him, and saw a familiar figure--or rather, his back, which was getting farther and farther away. A string of sadness wrapped around his heart, and he could feel it pulling as Nino drew farther away, but he resisted the urge to go off and sulk. He patted the kids on their heads and, with a final, jaunty salute, raced after Nino.

He tried to play it off on a whim, rushing past his best friend with little more than a friendly and completely innocuous "Hello!"

Nino called after him.

"Hey! Chat Noir!"

Chat stopped, arranging his face into something mildly cautious and quizzical, and turned around. He hung back as Nino caught up to him.

"I'm not-- I mean, you don't have to be anywhere?" Nino asked upon glimpsing his hero's face. Chat realized that despite his best efforts, he was grimacing, and he pushed it away with a polite smile.

"No," he said. "What's up, man?"

"I was just wondering what you were doing out," Nino replied. "And, I know this is a *huge* favor, but I've got a friend who would love to hear from you. She's close by. Would you mind...?"

Chat shrugged, and Nino took that as answer enough, heading off once more and beckoning for him to follow. He reflected sourly that Nino seemed to be full of boundless, excited energy. Alya must have been really excited for the prospect of an interview.

"So, what *does* bring you out today?" Nino asked casually. "Special occasion? Stakeout? You can tell me, I swear. I'm great at keeping secrets."

Chat thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess you could call it a special occasion. It's my birthday. I just thought I'd... get out, see how everyone's doing, you know?"

"Dude, no way!" Nino looked astounded. "Happy birthday, Chat Noir! Man, Alya will be so excited to hear that."

"Hear what?" Alya popped out from nowhere and fell into step with the boys. She lifted her phone. "Chat Noir! Mind if I get a picture for the blog?"

He shrugged, and grinned, and she snapped a selfie. As she uploaded it, she asked, "What am I excited for?"

"It's his birthday today," Nino said, his own wide grin egging Alya's on.

"You're kidding!" Alya cried. "It's his best friend's birthday, too!"

Nino bobbed his head. "Yeah! Man, he's *such* a huge fan of Ladybug, and you, too! Are you--I mean, I'm sure you're busy today, doing stuff and celebrating, but bro, listen, we're throwing him a party later, and it would be *insane* if you could stop by."

Chat scratched the back of his neck. Wait, they *had* to be talking about him--Adrien--right? So, what about...

"Uh," he began. "I don't know if I'm doing anything later. Probably. I mean, my friends might want to hang out, or... something."

Alya waved her hand. "No sweat! We're actually on our way over now, if you want to stick with us while we pick up some people and stuff. And we're probably going to be at it all afternoon. Just, stop by if you get a free moment."

Chat swallowed hard, and all he could get out was a nod.

Nino started with a sudden idea, and fished for his phone. “Dude, would you mind maybe just recording a short video real quick? For my bud? I don’t mean to bother you, really, but it would totally make his day.”

His two friends’ eagerness just seemed to keep magnifying his own awkwardness and embarrassment. How could he disappoint them, though, when they were apparently willing to do so much for him?

Even if they had locked him in his room and ignored him all morning. They must have had good intentions, he reasoned.

Chat nodded quickly, clearing his throat as Nino readied his camera. When Nino pointed at him, he began.

“Hey, Adrien, I, uh, heard it was your birthday today, so congrats, man!” He paused for a moment to cough and recollect his thoughts. Recording a secret message for himself was one of the strangest things he’d ever done. “Uh, your friends seem really excited about what they’ve got planned, so I hope you have a good day, and, um, yeah! Ladybug sends her love, too. Okay, bye!”

He waved manically, until he saw Nino giving him a thumbs-up. Nino put his phone back into his pocket and surged forward to grab Chat in a hug. “Dude, thanks so much!”

Chat hugged him back, remembering to keep some professional restraint, but not wanting to. After all, this was his best friend, who was nearly in tears from getting a thirty-second video of him stammering at himself.

Wow. He *loved* his friends. And he could feel that they loved him, too.

The past year had definitely changed him for the better.

He pulled back before he could follow that train of thought any farther, and before he started making things weird.

“I’ve got to be somewhere,” he said, already skipping backwards. “You guys are awesome! See you!”

Alya waved after him, while Nino just shot some finger-guns that he probably thought made him look cool. And, if Chat was honest, it did.

He slowed down after a few blocks and darted into the first hiding place he could find to transform back. As he meandered back home, with Plagg warm against his chest, he felt a deeper warmth, too, like a fire in his stomach. His friends were planning him a surprise party. They had gone a step beyond what he’d barely hoped for; Adrien’s plans had included little more than inviting a few people over to chill out and play some video games. But here was proof, here was *fact*, that they wanted to do something for him, too. Even without his asking. They wanted to spend this important day with him, and to make sure that he was happy.

He nearly forgot everything else as he approached the gate in front of his house and buzzed for Nathalie to let him in.

“A-Adrien?” Her voice sounded strange, perhaps from shock, or the tinny intercom system. “What are you doing… out?”

“Just taking a walk,” he said cheerfully, an innocent smile on his face, and she could do little else but let him in.

“Yes, but--” Nathalie met Adrien just inside the door, barely affording him a glimpse of the foyer before hustling him past and up to his room. She jiggled the doorknob, but of course it was still locked. “Your father received strict instructions not to let you out of your room until this afternoon. How did you get out?”

She unlocked the door and hastily ushered Adrien inside. He smirked at her dumbfounded expression as she looked back at him through the doorway. “I have my ways,” he said, knowing such a vague and mysterious answer would drive her up the wall.

She shook her head. “Stay here until you're called.” Adrien gave her a mock salute, and she relaxed a centimeter. “And, Adrien? Happy birthday.”

He smiled at her. “Thanks, Nathalie.”

He gently closed the door and crossed over to the couch, hurtling over the back and landing with a loud and comfortable *thump*. Plagg crawled out of his jacket to lie more securely on his chest, and Adrien scratched between his ears. He propped his head up on his other arm to look down at his kwami, who already looked ready to doze off.

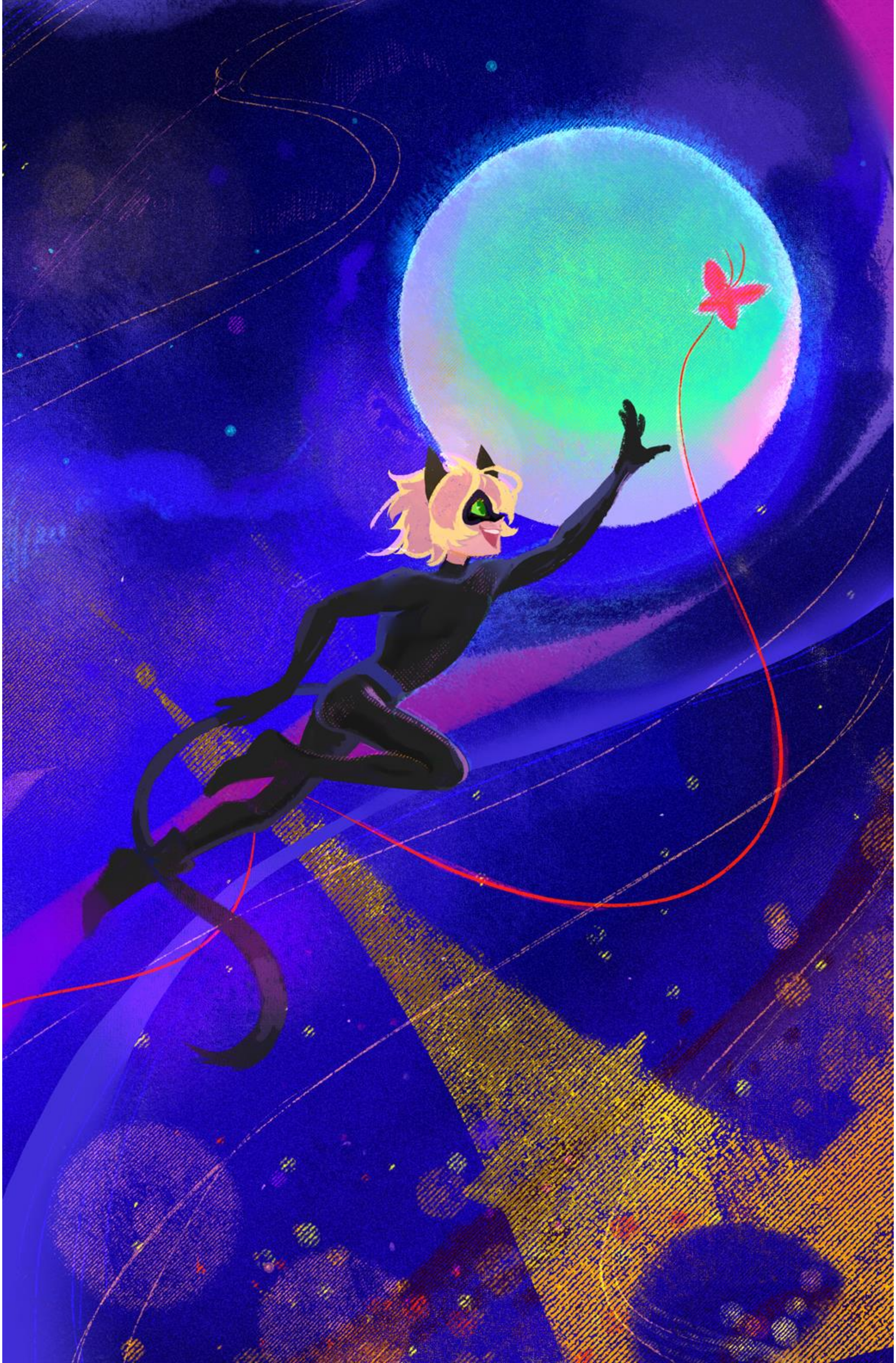
"Hey, Plagg? Does this count as cheating?" Adrien asked suddenly. "I mean, do you think they'll be upset that I know? It ruined the surprise."

Plagg blinked slowly, and then sighed in exasperation. "They don't even know that you know. All you need to do is act surprised when they come get you. Just appreciate that they're doing something nice for you, even if you did kind of mess up one end of it. They don't need to know. And now *you* know that they didn't forget you, so it all works out."

Adrien nodded. "Yeah, okay." He moved his other hand to lay flat on his chest, and Plagg laid his head on it, closing his eyes in contentment. "I love you."

Plagg opened his eyes for a split second and caught Adrien's gaze. He closed his eyes again, and his little mouth twitched into a fanged smile. "Love you, too, kid. Happy birthday."

-chatchevalier



MEO
WRA
CUL
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CHAT
NOIR
DELAY '17

To Bear the Scars of Life

Honestly, Marinette had no idea what she was doing right now. How had she somehow ended up walking through the dark Parisian streets in the middle of night, with Adrien Agreste? She looked down at their intertwined hands, still in shock as together they shivered in the autumn cold.

Looking back on the events of the night, it was quite obvious how this had happened: an Akuma.

A little over an hour ago Marinette Dupain-Cheng was sitting in the calming warmth of her bedroom. She could still catch the lingering scents of the delicious pastries from the kitchen down below as she tried to put her mind to her homework.

Physics wasn't exactly her strong suit, but it was still on her homework and in her way from a good night's sleep. It was just the latest item in a long list of things to go wrong on that day. From an upset principal, disappointed parents, rude and obnoxious girls, failing miserably again to talk to Adrien, and the constant paranoia of akuma attacks, Marinette was more than ready to head up to bed with the hope of getting a proper sleep for the first time in a very, very long time.

She immediately regretted that line of thought, because as she tried her best to focus on her studies, she heard the sound of the TV from the living room down below.

"Breaking news: Akuma spotted at the Pont Marie. All civilians are warned to evacuate the immediate area." This was further punctuated by a loud voice yelling in a very thick accent "I am Broseidon! Lord of the Brocean!"

Quick to move to action, Marinette summoned Tikki and was quickly jumping across the Paris skyline as Ladybug.

As it turned out, this akuma was rather straightforward. An avid surfer from California, he'd been forced to miss a surfing getaway in order to visit an ill relative in Paris. Naturally, he found the situation to be 'totally bogus'. Upon his arrival to the city, Hawkmoth was quick to take advantage of his negative emotions.

And so, Broseidon was born to submerge all of Paris under the 'most radical waves' unless he got Ladybug and Chat Noir's miraculous items.

Chat Noir seemed to be enjoying himself, considering all the jokes he could make about Poseidon, greek myths, and surfer puns. Ladybug wanted nothing more than to actually listen to his silly jests, since Chat's jokes always did lighten up her mood no matter how corny. Unfortunately, Broseidon turned out to be a lot more difficult to deal with. Like every akuma, looks were very deceiving.

The fight ended after Chat blocked a spear from Broseidon and fell into the Seine, giving Ladybug the golden opportunity to snatch the sea shell necklace from around the akuma's neck and easily snap it in half. With a quick "Bye bye petite papillon!" and a wave of her yoyo, the akuma was cleansed.

Ladybug had a moment to breathe as Chat Noir climbed out of the river, brushing himself off with a grin, as if blocking a trident and falling into a river was nothing but an inconvenience to him.

"Well done My Lady!" he spoke, letting the nickname roll off his tongue as their fists bumped together. Ladybug was glad his usual bravado couldn't be weighed down by a little water.

"Same to you, Mon Minou." Ladybug replied with a smile, ghosting her fingers under his chin as a small reward for his bravery. One day she'd bake a cake for him in thanks of his work, she was sure of it.

Realizing how exhausted they were, the duo parted ways to de-transform.

Ladybug chose to transform under the bridge they'd just fought by. Making sure her kwami was safe inside her purse again, Marinette took a brief moment to stretch out in the moonlight, enjoying the last breath of air under the full moon before she headed back towards home. She did rather love the night air, and it was a great source of inspiration for clothing designs. While she was tired prior to the battle, the adrenaline pumping through her veins left her full of energy despite her exhaustion.

It was then, that Adrien tapped her shoulder. He must have seen her and come down to ask how she was, because he was halfway through saying “Hey Marinette! What are you doing out here?” before Marinette could only hear the rush of water around her. She’d been so focused on the moon that when Adrien tapped her shoulder, she jumped in fright right into the Seine.

And so Adrien saved her from drowning in the river. Naturally he was curious as to what Marinette was doing out so late by the Seine, so close to the akuma attack that had just passed. When she responded with “I could ask you the same, but we should probably dry off first” he decided it might be best to leave that question unanswered for the moment.

Marinette promptly invited him to come home with her to dry off so she could properly repay him for his act of kindness. Despite Adrien profusely apologized over and over for scaring her into the river in the first place, Marinette wasn’t about to let him slip off without paying him back for saving her.

Thus that’s how Marinette had ended up here, holding Adrien Agreste’s hand as the two of them weaved through the dark streets of Paris, still dripping wet from their dip in the Seine as the chill nighttime air pricked at their wet clothes.

It didn’t take long to get to Marinette’s home. Luckily, Tom and Sabine had already gone to bed before Mari left to deal with the akuma.

Adrien got the hint from her to keep it down as she unlocked the door, letting them both in and ushering him up to the warmth of her room. He must have liked the smell of it, because every few seconds Marinette would steal a glance at the golden haired boy, and notice him taking a brief pause to enjoy it. Did Adrien really not get enough sweets to eat? A worthy subject to check on at a later date.

Once the door was closed, Marinette quickly fetched a towel for Adrien from her bathroom, then departed from the room to get another for herself. She was extremely glad she’d somewhat come to terms with her crush, convincing herself to pull down most of those pictures of him and stop keeping his schedule around. It would have been absolutely mortifying if those were still up and Adrien saw them.

Scrounging up a towel from the hall closet, she made her way back up to her room, already rubbing the towel over her hair to dry it off before she could get to her bathroom and finish the rest. Once she was back to her room she could get a spare set of clothes to change into, but that left the issue of what to do with Adrien. Her parents clearly didn’t know she’d gone out, let alone brought a guest home, and they were very clear about late night walks and inviting guests in. “If i don't have time to bake fresh cookies,” Tom would say, “Then there isn’t enough time for a guest!”

As Marinette pushed open the trap door with her free hand, she was gifted a visage designed by the gods themselves; a shirtless Adrien Agreste. He had taken off his shirt as it was soaking wet, and he’d given Marinette his jacket so she wasn’t too cold, so there he stood in all his dripping glory. Oh how she could die happy now!

She stared in awe, admiring the glow in his hair from her bedroom lights, her fluffy pink towel being run over his arms, the way what little water remained glistened as it slide down the scars on his back—

Wait…

Scars?

Adrien Agreste was prized for his perfect complexion among his many other traits. Magazines and agencies often bragged about how perfect his skin was. Hardly a blemish or mark could ever be found. Yet from where Marinette crouched peeking through her own trap door, she could see very clearly his skin wasn’t nearly as perfect as she’d been led to believe.

Not to mention it wasn’t just one small, insignificant scar. No, Adrien’s back and arms were littered with scars. Some were a pale white that seemed fairly old, but others were colored fresher pinks, clearly newer. Among them was a wide bright red scar flanked by two smaller ones, so fresh the skin seemed ready to bleed again.

Slowly pushing the trap door out of the way, Marinette’s feet ghosted across the floor as the towel she'd been holding slipped from her fingers to land on the floor in a pile. Her mind was hazy, focused only on those three unique, and eerily familiar scars.

"Marinette?" Adrien glanced over his shoulder to her, concern knitting his eyebrows as he caught sight of her hallowed gaze. "Uh, are you—" His voice died in his throat as a set of small lithe fingers splayed out over the scars.

She knew them, these scars on his skin. Each one was more than just new skin, they were a life saved. The one on the left side of his neck came from an arrow, fired by a wannabe Robin Hood-based akuma. Below that resting over his left shoulder blade was a slashing mark from the blade of a deranged man who believed he was a knight of King Arthur's Court. Between his shoulder blades was a circular scar earned from blocking a bolt of magical lightning. Decorating his arms were scars from a hailstorm of glass shards that had impaled deep into the flesh.

There was a horn and hoof marks from a mechanical minotaur, darts of a psychotic board game master, a giant needle from a seamstress, the bite of a dog, claw marks from some beast, and to top off just the ones she knew off hand, was the three pronged scars belonging to a trident. They were still fresh, the lightest touch still eliciting a hiss from the boy who bore them.

Marinette could name the rest if given enough time, but therein lay the problem: she could name them, each and every one of them. Those scars belonged to a multitude of akuma battles that spanned the last two years of her heroic career, but none of them belonged on the perfect body of Adrien Agreste.

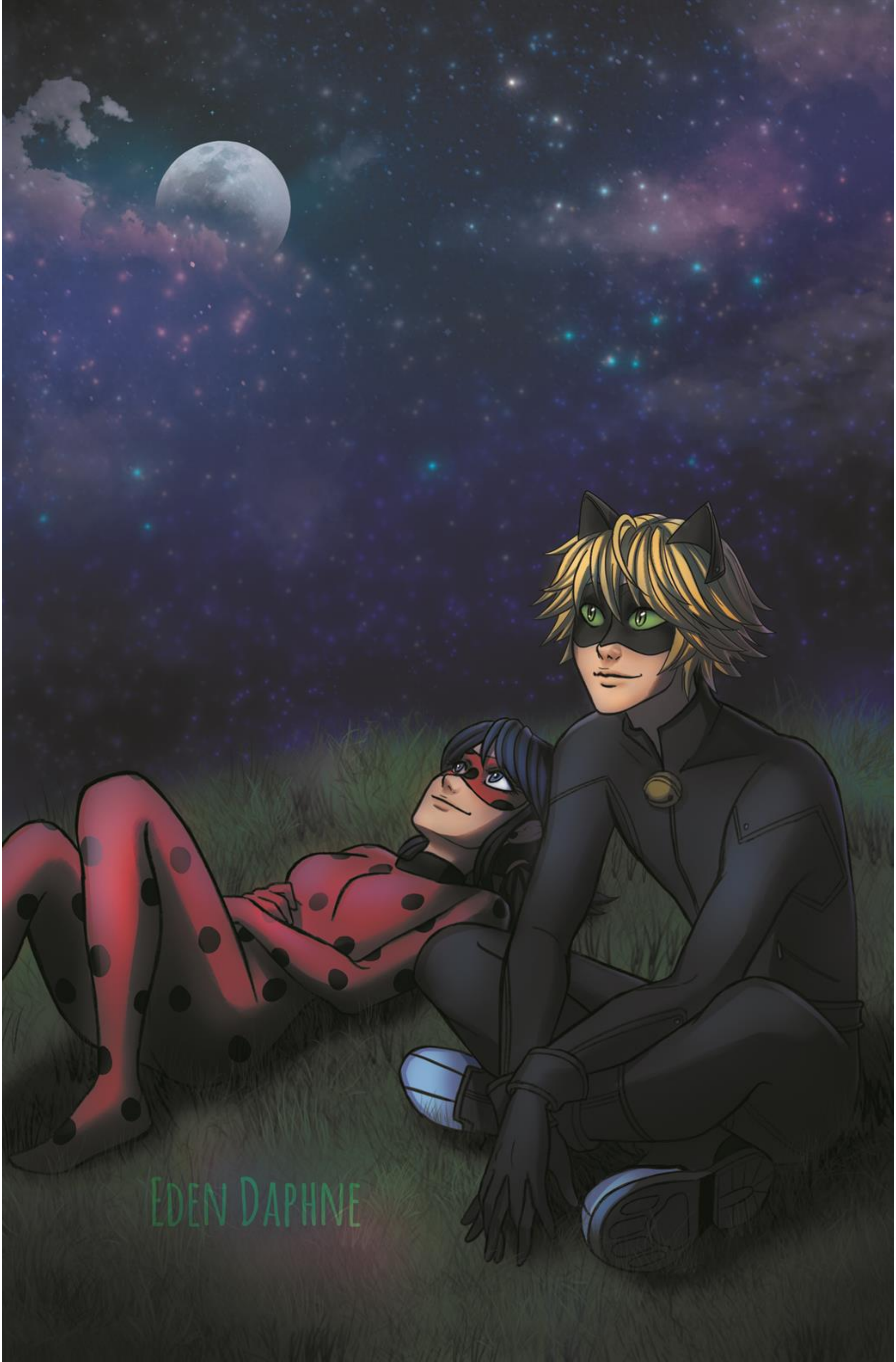
They adorned but one person and one person alone. Someone who had taken countless blows for his Lady over the years, giving his everything to make sure that Ladybug always came out on top in the battles. She had *seen* him hurl himself countless times between herself at the akumas that threatened her life, and countless times more seen him fall because of them.

But she always brought him back, stole him from the brink of death itself. Ladybug had always saved her Black Cat, just like he saved her, over and over again.

Because that's who he was, incredibly self-less, absolutely amazing, impressively brave, completely dorky, and so, so kind…her partner.

Chat Noir.

-dracoskullart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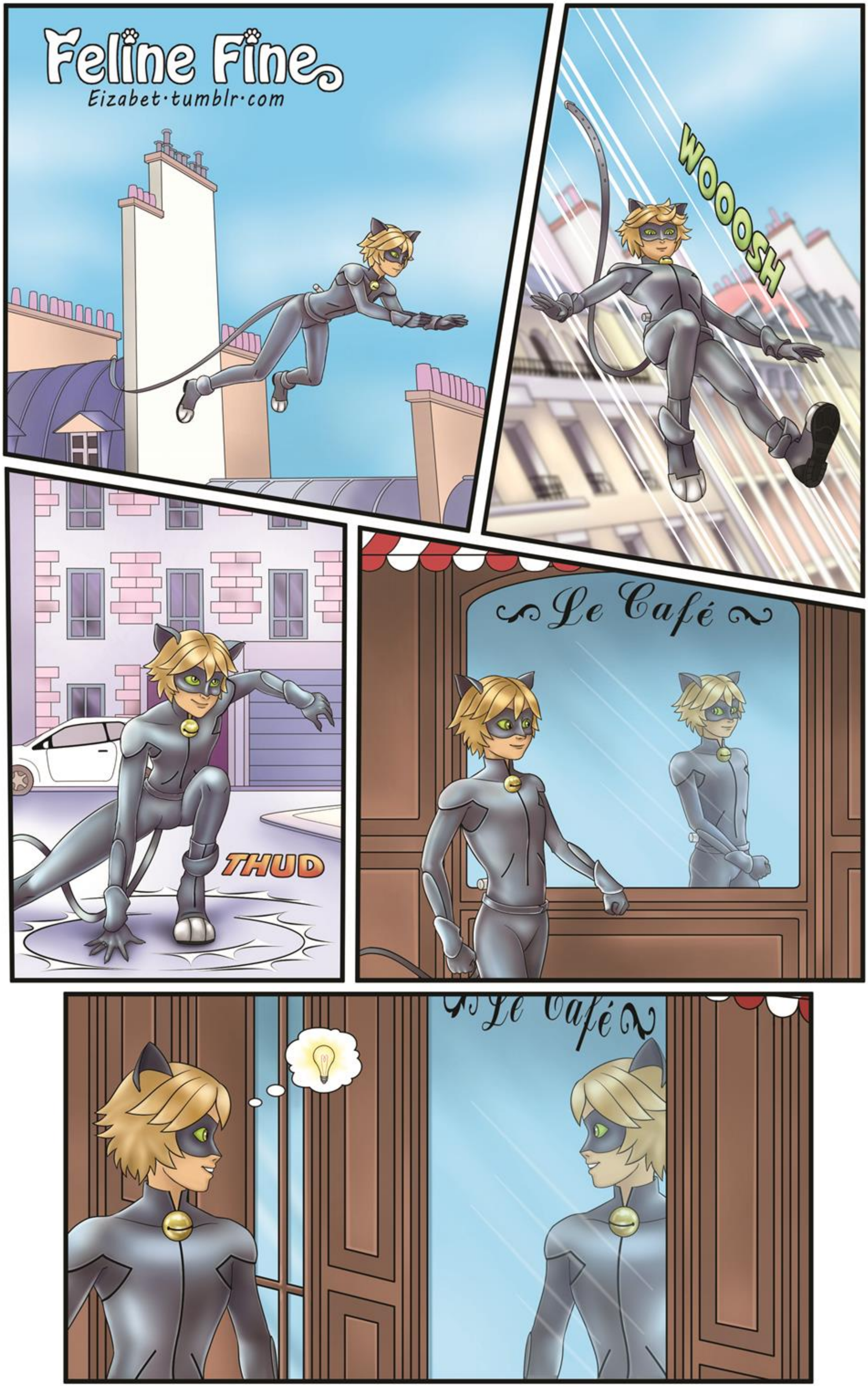
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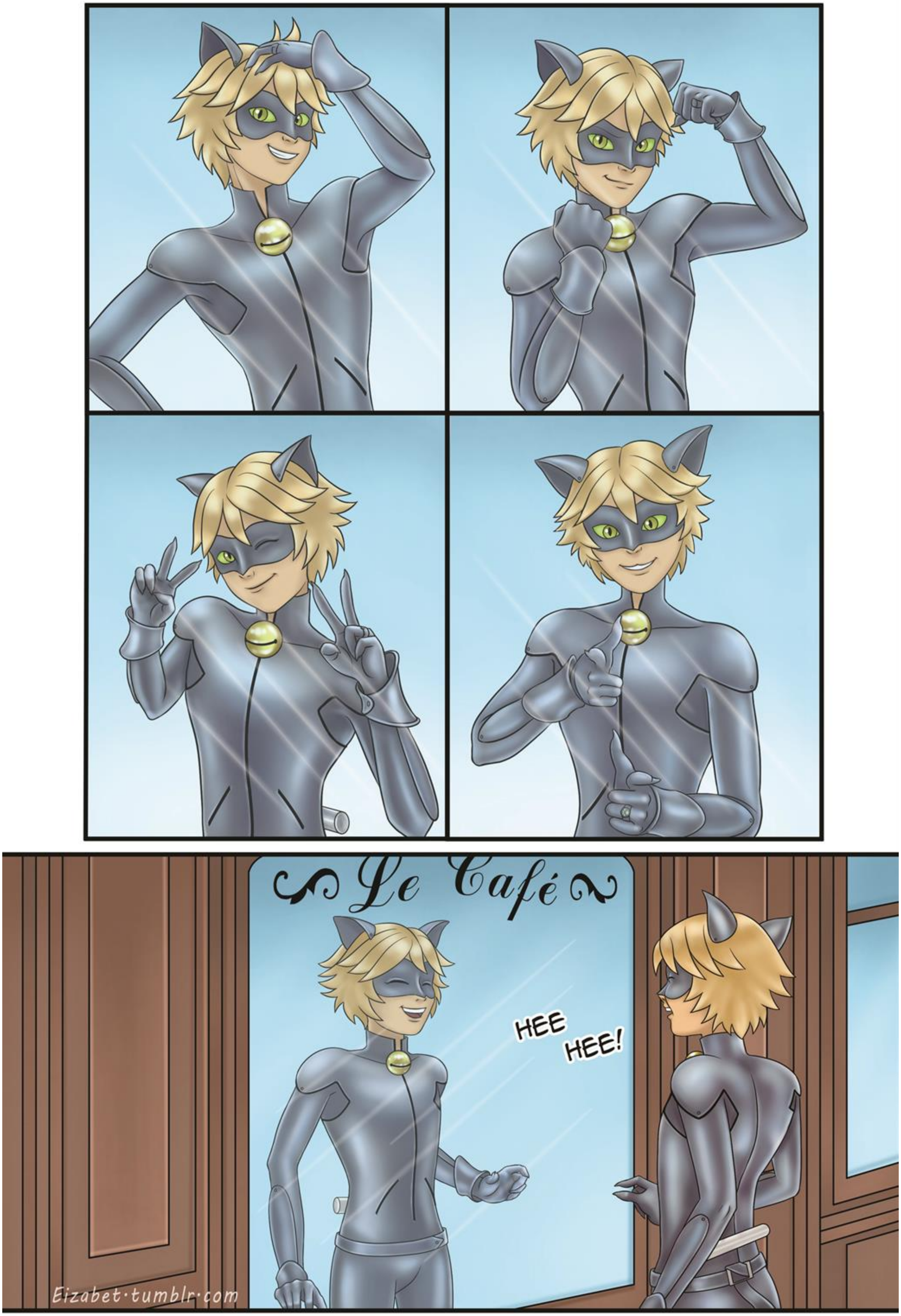
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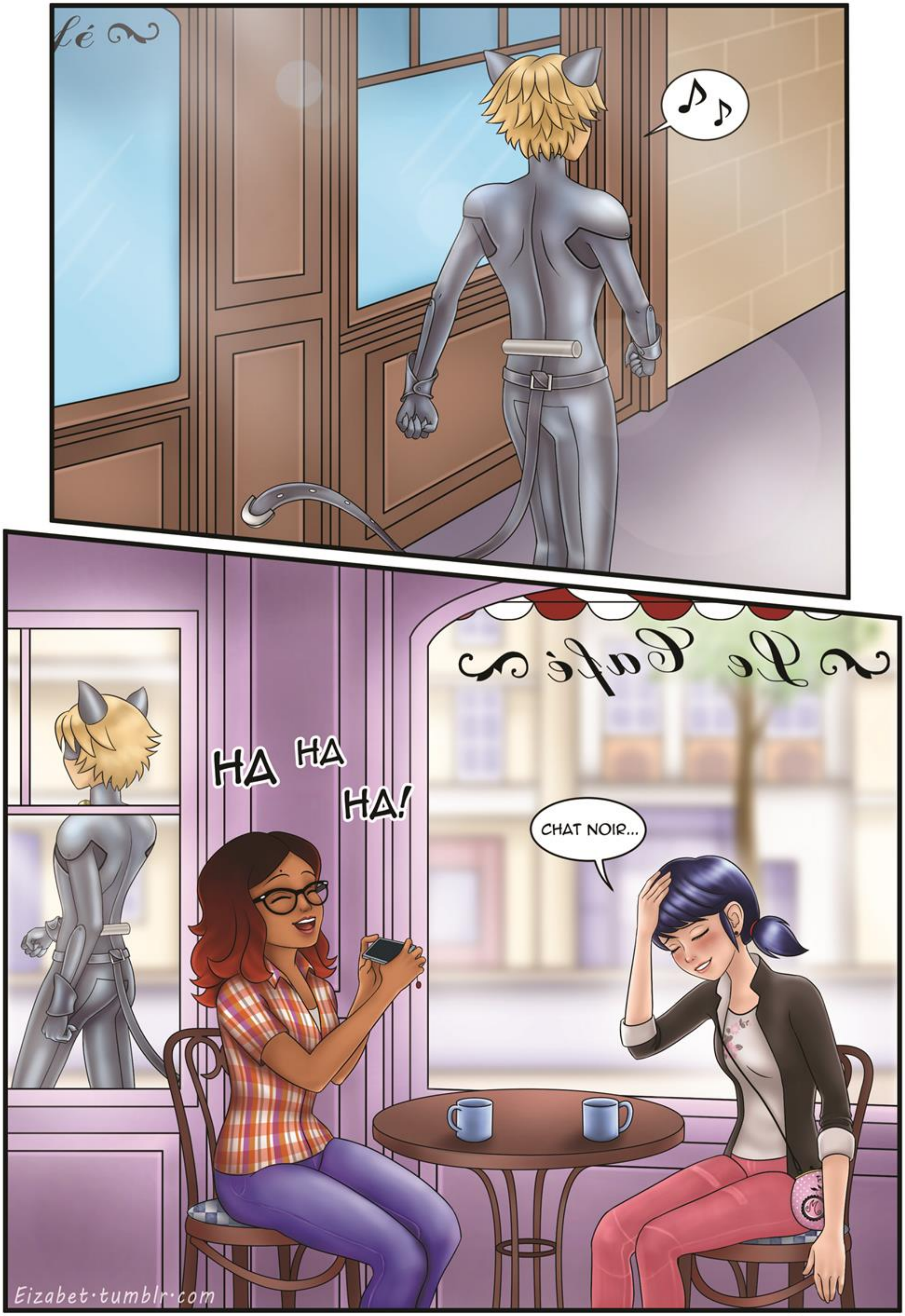

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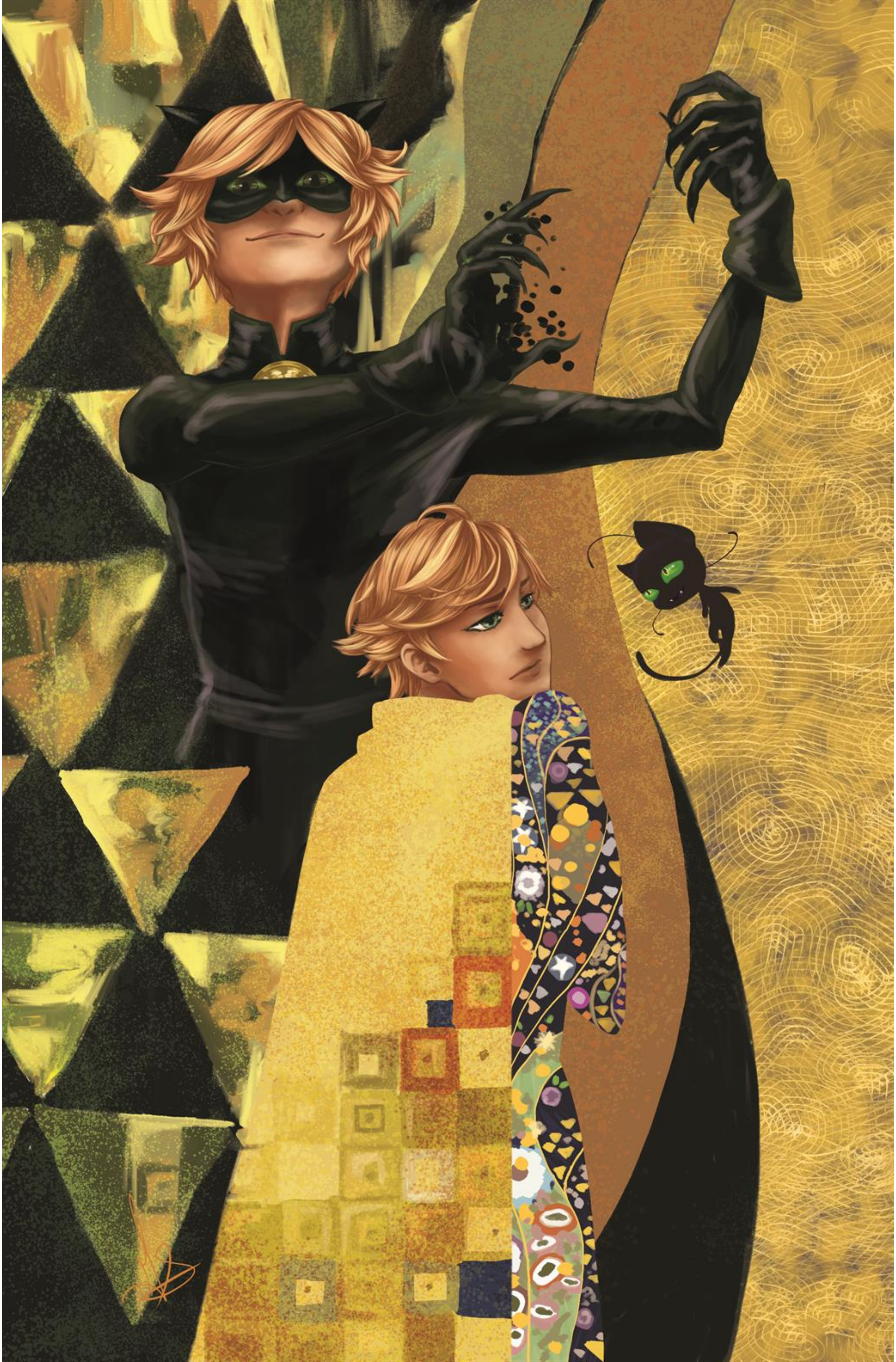

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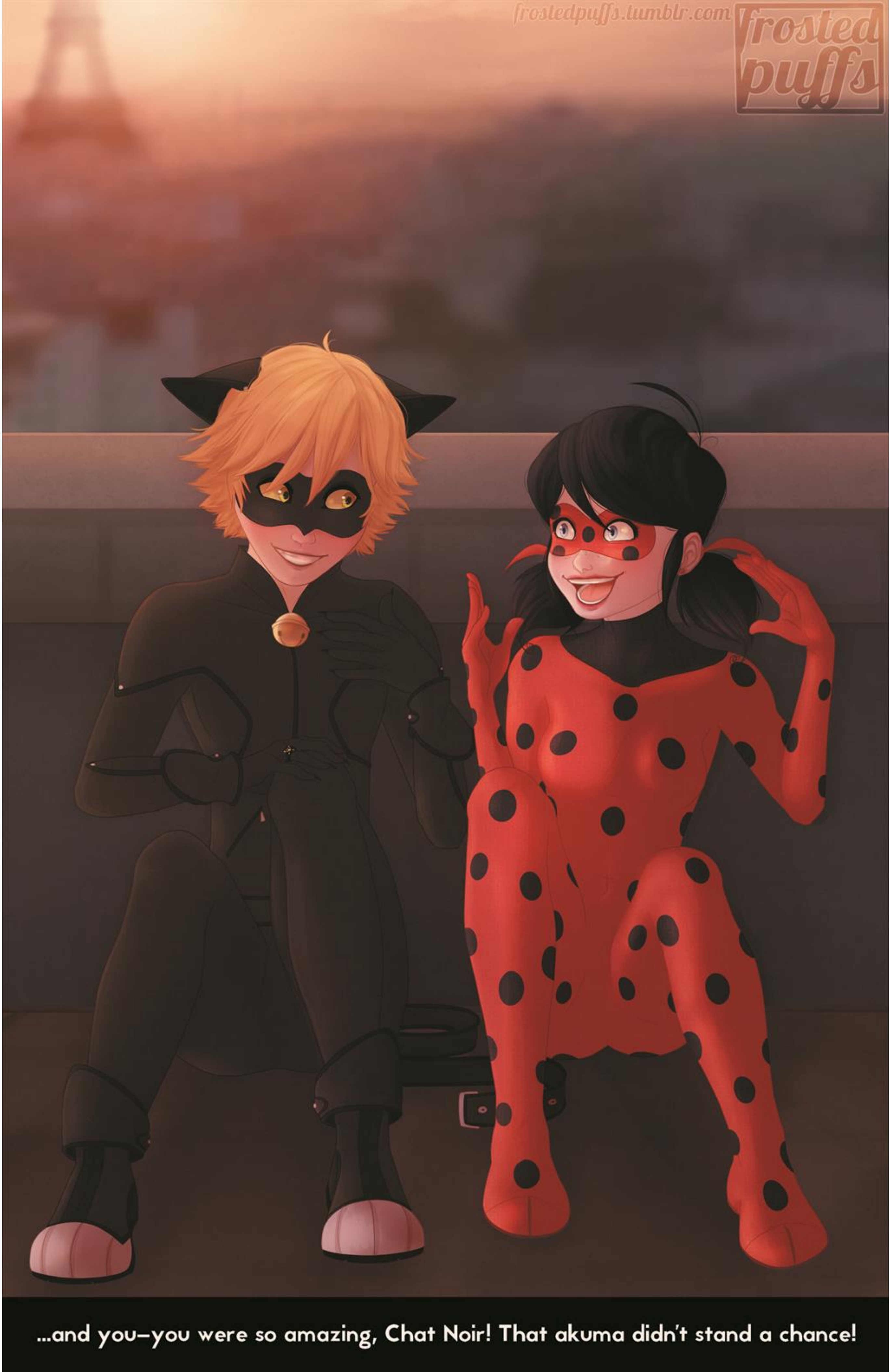
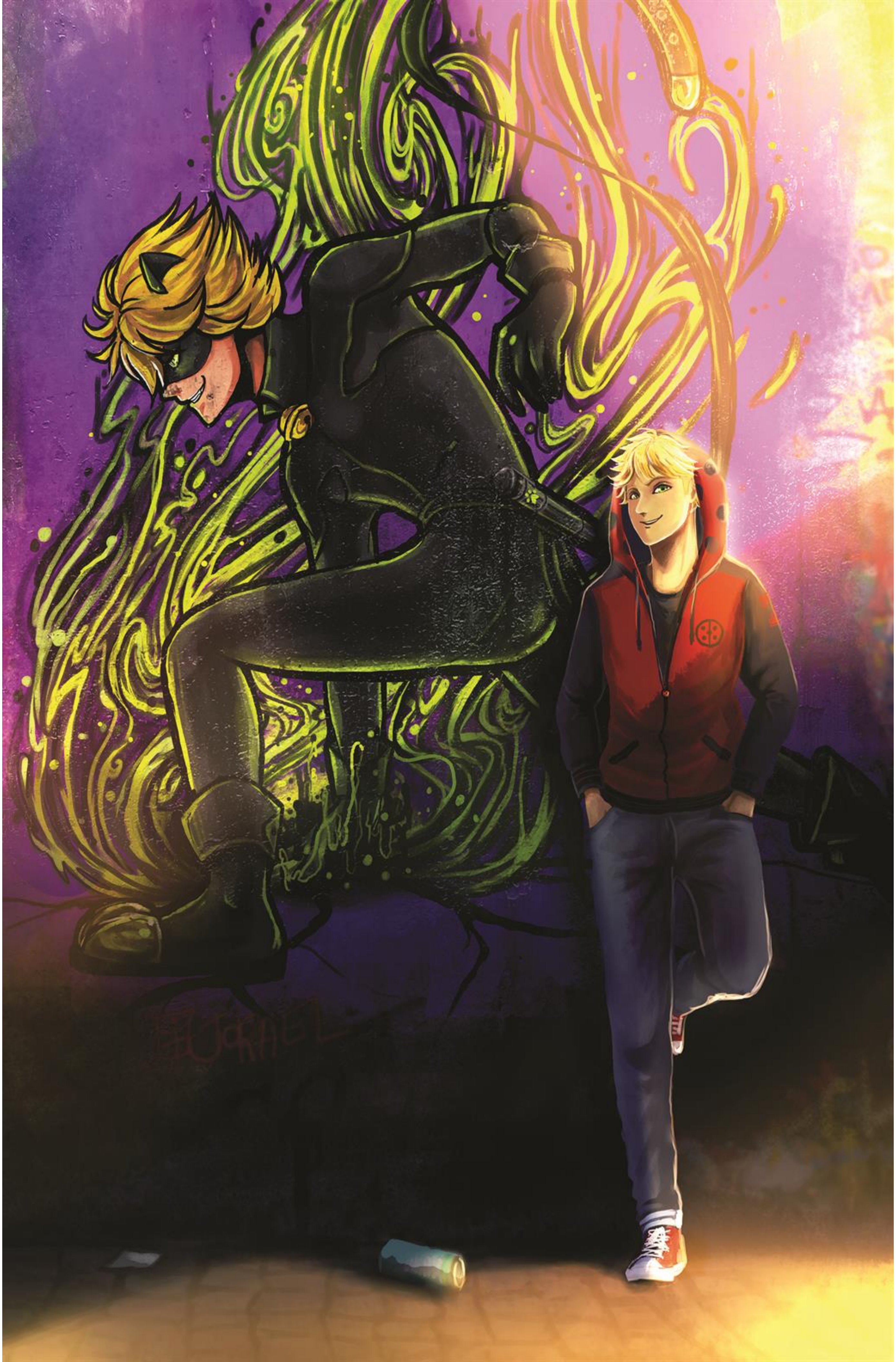
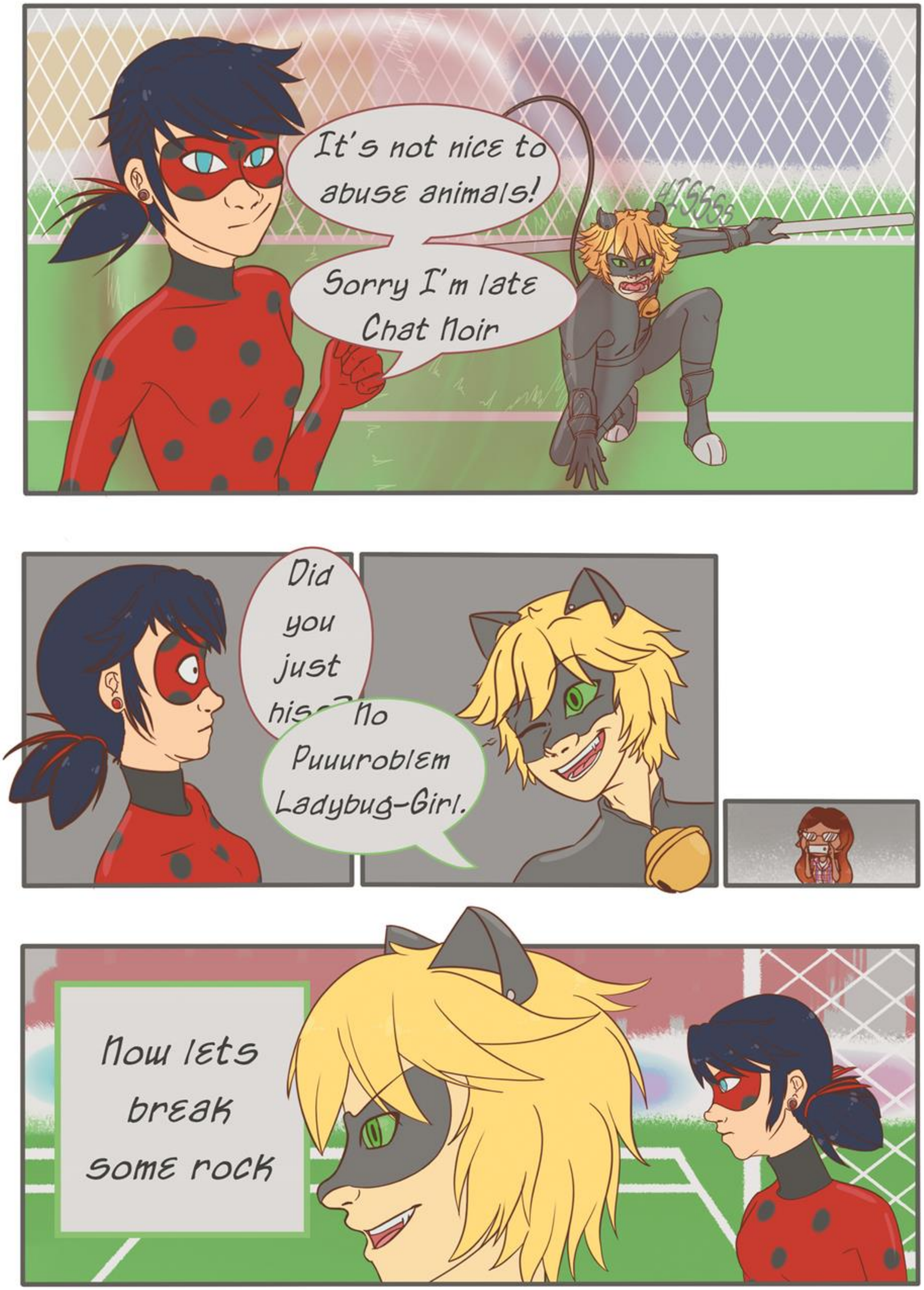
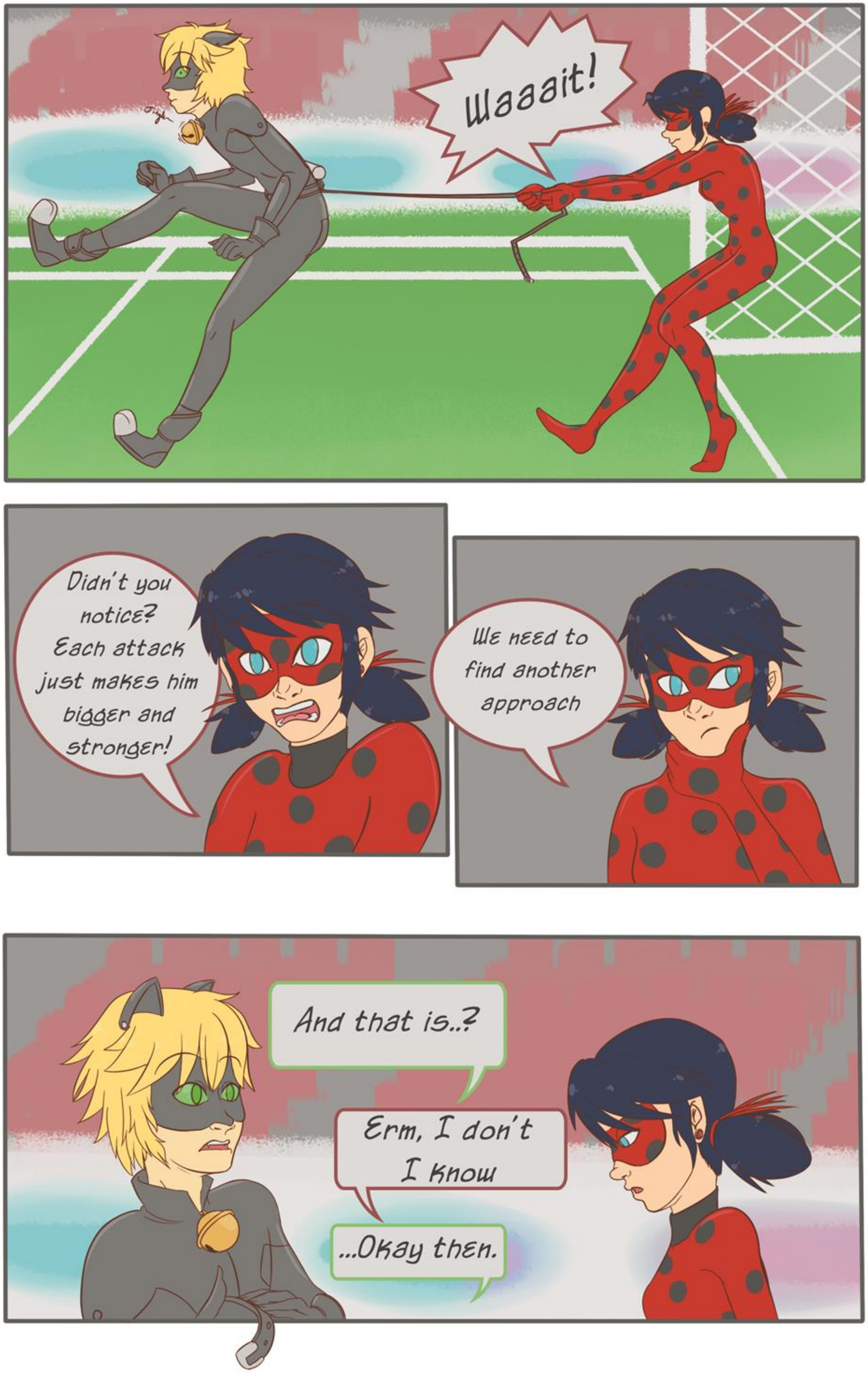
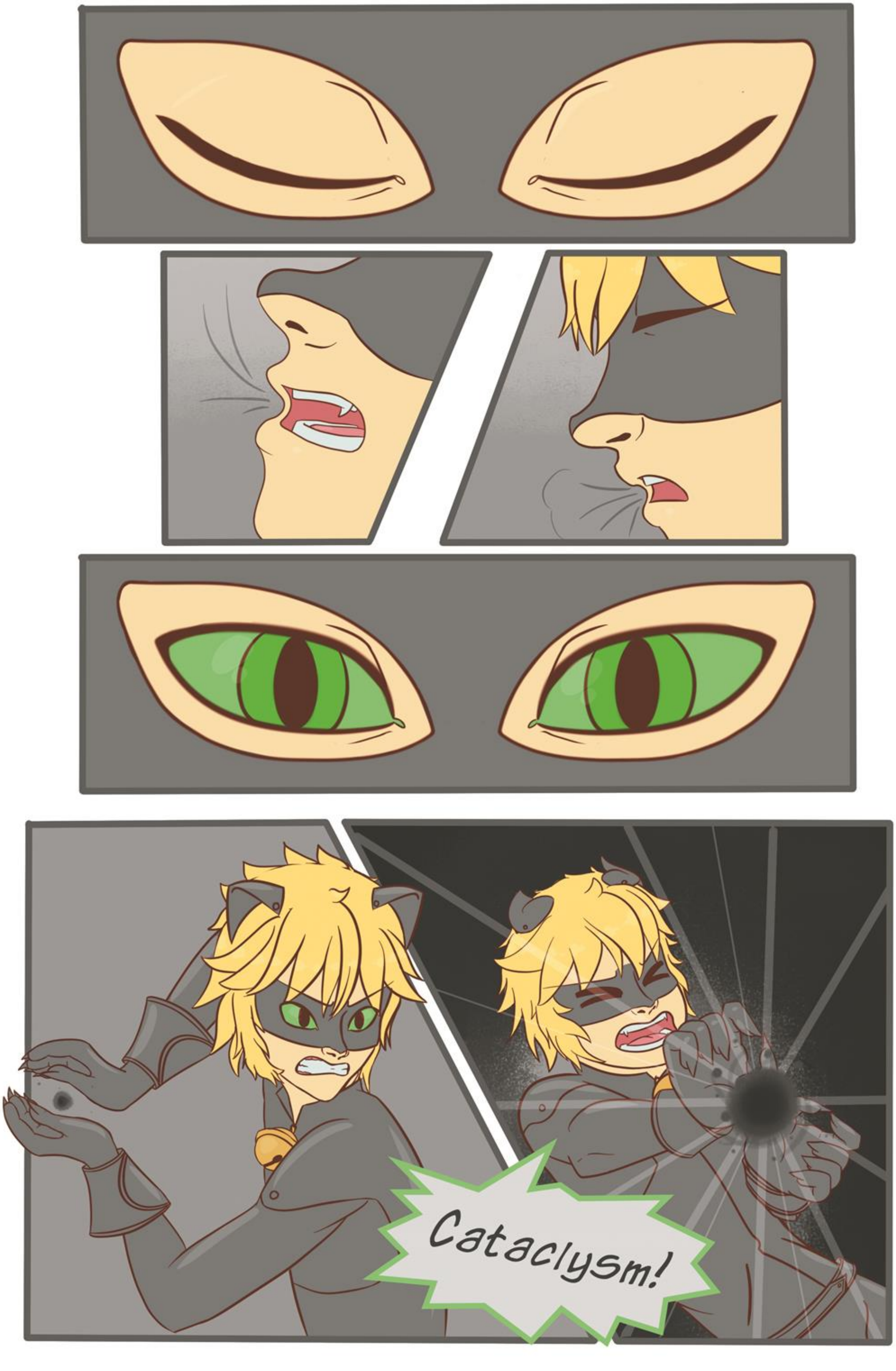

...and you–you were so amazing, Chat Noir! That akuma didn't stand a chance!

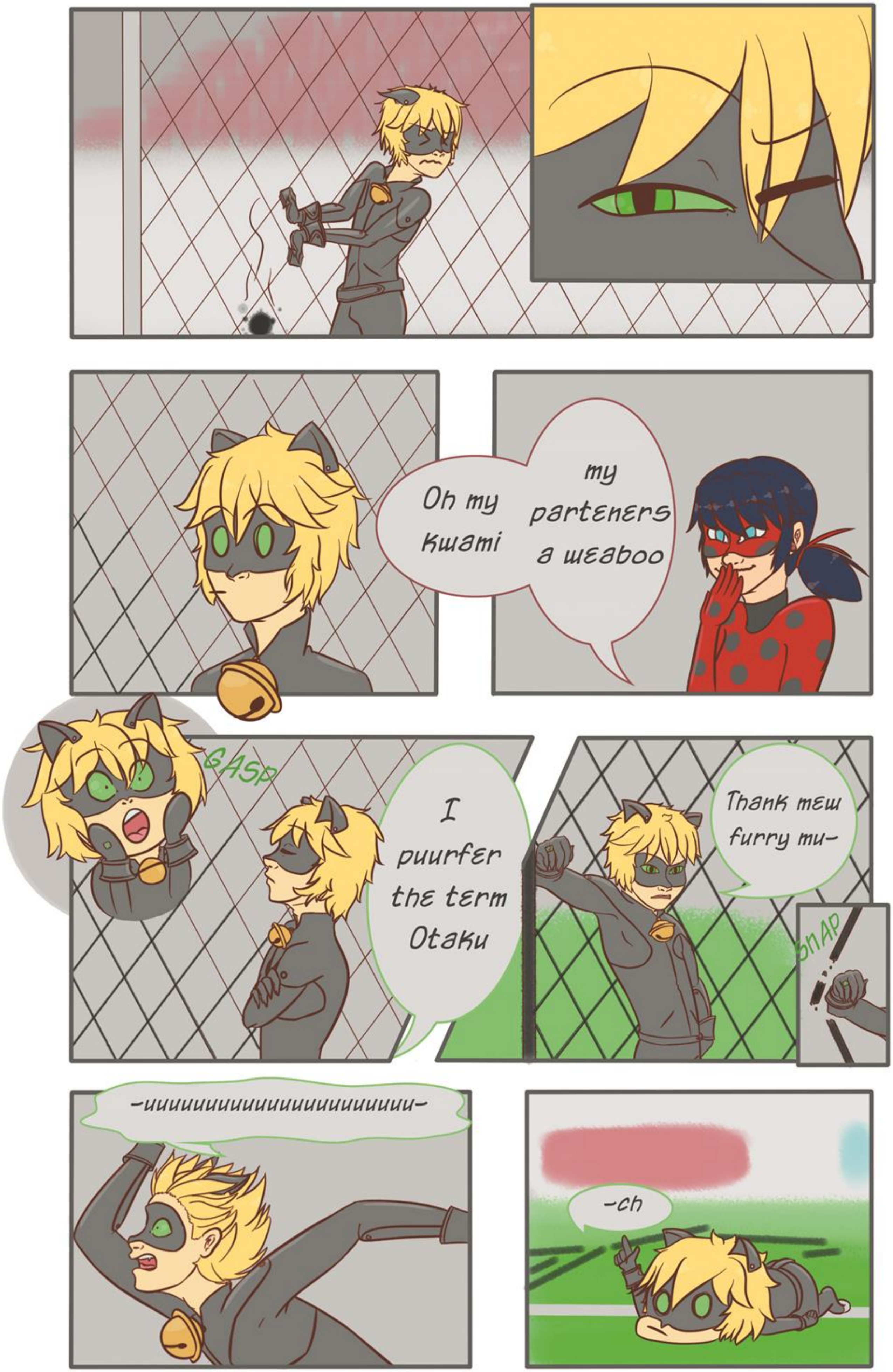


Chataclysm


It's not nice to abuse animals!
HISSSss
Sorry I'm late Chat Noir
Did you just his
No Puuuroblem Ladybug-Girl.
Now lets break some rock


Jingle
Waaait!
Didn't you notice? Each attack just makes him bigger and stronger!
We need to find another approach
And that is..?
Erm, I don't I know
...Okay then.


Cataclysm!


Oh my kwami
my parteners a weaboo
GASP
I puurfer the term Otaku
Thank mew furry mu-
SNAP
-uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu-
-ch

Croissants, Scarves, and the Best Possible Outcome

It was official: something was up with Ladybug.

She had come to patrol seeming awkward and had stuttered her way through it, leaving Chat wondering as to what was actually wrong with his partner. He'd asked her, of course, but she hadn't really given him an answer.

"Oh nothing, *Chaton*," she'd said, waving away his question. "I just discovered something today, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it."

Ladybug had been somewhat awkward with him since then, but she soon went back to normal. Sort of. Kind of. (There'd been a few moments of unexplained stuttering.) Now, however, as Adrien watched Marinette stammer and blush around him, he had to wonder if there was something in the air or if he just had a predisposition to making people uncomfortable.

But Marinette's awkwardness went away in an instant when Adrien made the comment that Chat Noir wasn't as important as Ladybug.

"*Excuse me*?!" she demanded, her hands on her hips and an eyebrow raised dangerously.

Alya and Nino, who were responsible for bringing the heroes of Paris up in the first place, shot him looks of sympathy.

Adrien was struck with the notion that he had just made a very, very big mistake.

"Chat Noir is just as important as Ladybug!" Marinette declared passionately. She looked like she wanted to say more, but she shut her mouth and stormed out of the room, muttering under her breath words that sounded like, "Show him," and something about the intelligence of cats.

Adrien watched her go and turned to Alya and Nino, bewildered. "What was—? I didn't mean to make her angry? I just—what?"

Nino clapped him on the back. "Dude, it was nice knowing you. Marinette's gonna destroy you."

"But—what? *Why*?"

Alya's eyes sparkled with mirth. "Here lies Adrien Agreste: Death by Marinette Dupain-Cheng."

"Guys!"

"My sweet summer child, you don't know what you're in for," Alya said.

"Can I have your gaming system when you die?" Nino asked.

"*Guys*!"

The blogger took pity on him and explained, "With my girl, there's one thing you should *never* do."

She paused for dramatic effect and Adrien nearly groaned in frustration. "Which is?" He prompted.

"Insult Chat Noir."

* * *

The first thing out of the ordinary was a bag of croissants waiting for him at Chat and Ladybug's normal patrol rendezvous point.

Chat Noir looked at it, confused. What was it doing there?

He picked it up. Even in the low light, his night vision had no trouble making out the Tom & Sabine Boulangerie Patisserie logo on the bag. Nor did he have trouble reading the note that was attached to it: *To my favourite cat,* and signed with a familiar picture of a ladybug.

His heart thumped in his chest. His Lady left him this? She had to, he'd recognised that picture of a ladybug anywhere. He'd seen her sign it hundreds of times before. But why had she left it for him?

Not willing to look a gift horse in the mouth, nor ready to run the risk of Nathalie taking them off him if he took them home, Chat scoffed the croissants down in record time. Feeling full, Chat shot off to complete his patrol. But when he met up with Ladybug and asked her about them afterwards, all she said was that they were a gift for being such a wonderful partner.

(He tried not to let such high praise go to his head; he failed. He also tried to convince himself that such a simple gesture from his Lady couldn't make him fall even more in love with her; he failed that, too.)

He should get her something as well, right?

"Don't think even think about it, *Chaton*," Ladybug said, clearly reading his thoughts.

"But—"

"It's a gift, Chat Noir. You don't have to give me something just because I gave one to you."

"But I *want* to."

Ladybug shook her head. "You do enough for me as it is," she paused, looking thoughtful and strangely guilty. "Today I heard someone say that you weren't as important as me, and it made me realise that I don't show how much you mean to me as often as I should. You're amazing, and I don't tell you that enough."

Jeez, Ladybug couldn't just *say things like that* without it doing ridiculous things to his heart!

Even as he basked in her praise, he rushed to console her. "My Lady, you don't have to do that. I know that you—"

She put a finger to his lips, silencing him. "But I *want* to," she told him, repeating what he'd said moments before.

As Chat spluttered and tried to find words to say *you don't have to, I'm not as important as you, oh my god, I love you*, Ladybug stepped away from him and prepared to yoyo herself off into the Parisian night.

"I hope you liked the croissants," she said. "Until next time, Chat Noir!"

She soared away and he managed to get out a response. "I loved them."

His *I love you* went unsaid, as always.

* * *

At school the next morning, Adrien sat at his desk and mused over his Lady's behaviour. He wasn't sure how he'd handle it if she continued to shower him with her attention. He'd barely survived the night before. His Lady had expressed how much he meant to her and Adrien had all but melted into a pile of happy, cat-themed superhero. What was he going to do if she did it again? He'd probably die.

He was so preoccupied with thinking about Ladybug, he didn't realise Nino had been talking to him until it became painfully obvious.

"So, Alya and I are thinking of eloping and we're going to move to Australia to film a documentary on all the weird animals over there."

His attention finally caught, Adrien did a double take at his best friend. "*What*?"

Nino laughed. "Finally! My best bro comes back to Earth! I've been trying to get your attention for ages."

Adrien sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry."

Nino waved away his apology. "No worries. It's not important. What's up?"

He shrugged. "It's nothing."

His best friend gave him a sceptical look. "Yeah, right. Seriously, bro, how can I help?"

Adrien smiled. How in the world did he deserve a friend like Nino? "It's really nothing," he said. "It's actually a good thing. My friend just did something unexpected last night and I'm still caught up in it, I guess."

Nino looked ready to press him for details, but Adrien was saved by the arrival of Marinette. The designer looked exhausted as she sat down in her seat behind him.

"Morning, Marinette," he and Nino chorused.

"Good morning, Nino," —she paused to yawn— "Adrien."

"Didn't get much sleep last night?" Nino asked.

She shook her head. "No, I stayed up to make a present for a friend."

Adrien smiled. Marinette was such a nice person. It was so like her to sacrifice her sleep to make a gift for someone. He also wondered what Nino had meant about her 'destroying' him because he'd insulted Chat Noir. Marinette didn't seem like the type to destroy anyone (except maybe Chloé).

"What did you make?" He inquired.

Marinette's expression turned faraway and Adrien instinctively knew that she was thinking of her friend. She smiled and he was struck with the sudden realisation of how pretty Marinette looked in that moment.

(Like, *wow*. Marinette was cute.)

Adrien pushed the errant thought away and focused on what she was saying. “I didn’t just make one thing for him. I was also…planning.”

Nino gave an ‘ooh’ of interest. “Planning what?”

Marinette put a finger to her lips and then did something entirely unexpected.

She winked.

Holy mother.

Okay, yep. *That* was a way Marinette could destroy someone.

Adrien had pretend to get something out of his bag, just to hide the blush that burnt his cheeks. That was—that was too cute! Since when did Marinette wink? She shouldn’t be winking! Winking was *his* thing! Was this how she and Ladybug reacted when he winked at them?! And why was he having such a reaction to Marinette doing it?!

“Aww, come on, dude!” Nino wheedled when she wouldn’t give any details. “Don’t leave us hanging!”

Adrien, hoping his blush had receded, nodded along with his best friend.

“Well,” Marinette started, but was interrupted by Alya entering the classroom.

“Hey, guys, how are y—” The blogger cut herself off at the sight of her best friend. “Mari, you’re here.”

“Was I supposed to be somewhere else?”

“You’re here *on time*.”

“I’m not always late, you know.”

Still looking surprised, Alya walked over to look out one of the windows.

“What are you doing?” Marinette asked her.

“Just checking to see if pigs are flying.”

Marinette rolled her eyes and the rest of them laughed. “Very funny,” the designer said sarcastically.

Alya came over to sit at her desk. “Love you, girl.”

Their very mature and respectable class president just poked her tongue out at her.

With the arrival of Alya and their subsequent subject change, Adrien didn’t have time to dwell on how cute he suddenly found Marinette, or how he was going to handle attention from Ladybug.

Ah well, he’d figure that out later.

* * *

Or he could avoid the problem until it resurfaced in the shape of a present that Ladybug gave him on patrol a few days later.

He accepted her gift in a dumb, surprised stupor. Chat supposed that he should have seen it coming, as his Lady had been adamant on proving just how much she cared for him over the last few days. Regardless, he was still surprised and receiving a present from his Lady made his heart beat wildly in his chest.

He unwrapped it with painstaking care, and Ladybug watched him with an expression of fond exasperation. Her eyes gleamed in anticipation; it seemed she was just as excited for him to open his present as he was.

It was a scarf. A green scarf that matched the colour of his eyes; on the end of it was a picture of a black cat chasing a Ladybug.

Chat loved it instantly.

His heart beat even faster and he felt like he’d been hit in the stomach with feels. He was always someone who had a way with words, but he had no idea how to express how much the gift meant to him. “My Lady, thank you. I—I…” He trailed off and looked around, as if their surroundings would give him an idea of what to say.

He wrapped it around his neck. “I love it,” he finally said. “How do I look?”

Ladybug beamed at him. Gosh, Chat could write poems about that smile. That smile was dangerous. People could be lost to it. His Lady should stop using Lucky Charms, because Chat was certain an akuma would lay down their arms if they were faced with her smile. It was—

“You look great,” she said, interrupting his train of thought.

"Really?" He asked, a blush burning his cheeks.

"Yeah, you could totally be a model."

Chat froze. His Lady was joking, he knew that, but she could never know how close to the truth she really was. "You know it," he joked, pulling an overly exaggerated modelling pose. "Runway material, right here."

She laughed. "I'd buy your modelling posters."

Chat almost fell over.

Sweet mother of camembert! Did she even know the effect she had on him?

He had to tell her how he felt. He *had* to. He didn't think he could take much more of this.

"Ladybug, I need to talk to you," Chat began. "I've tried to tell you this so many times before and something always comes up. An akuma attacks, or I chicken out, or *something*, and—"

She cut him off with a hug and Chat went still in her arms. After a moment of hesitation, Chat hugged her back. He clung to her, breathing her in and committing the moment to memory.

"I've been trying to tell you the same thing," Ladybug said into his ear, "but you didn't realise. Neither of us realised."

Chat pulled back in shock. "What?"

"I've got another surprise for you," she continued, completely ignoring his dumbfounded question. "But you won't get it until tomorrow."

"What?" Chat repeated.

"I hope you'll like it. I'll see you then."

Then she killed him by pressing a kiss to his cheek and yoyoing herself away.

Chat watched her go, feeling like a strange combination of confused, elated, and incredibly, incredibly in love.

That still didn't stop him from uttering one word into the Parisian night: "*What*?"

* * *

Adrien was still feeling bewildered (and still wearing the scarf) when he went to school the next morning.

It was a feeling that only increased when he stood at the bottom of the school steps and saw that everyone was dressed in either a Chat Noir costume or merchandise.

"Whaaaat?" He murmured to himself.

He was startled out of his confusion by Nino clapping him on the back. "Duuuuuuude! Why aren't you in costume? I love the scarf, though."

Adrien still didn't understand what was going on. "What is all this? Just—what? Have I missed something?"

(Because really, how could he have missed the memo of everyone dressing up as *himself*?)

His best friend frowned. "Did you not get the email?"

"What email?"

"Clearly not."

"*Nino*."

The DJ gestured to all the people dressed as Adrien's superhero self. "It's the first annual 'We Love Chat Noir Day!' Cool, huh?"

Adrien tried to hide how utterly stunned he felt, but he didn't think he succeeded. This…this was all for him? "R-really?"

"You bet!" Alya's voice sounded from behind them and he and Nino turned to see the blogger approaching them, Marinette at her side.

Adrien nearly had a stroke.

Whereas Alya was decked out in Chat Noir merchandise, Marinette was dressed in a complete Chat Noir costume. A very form-fitting black suit, complete with belt, bell, boots, mask, cat ears and staff. The only thing that didn't fit the outfit was the little pink purse that always hung at her hip.

She looked good. She looked really, *really* good.

Was Adrien blushing? He felt like he was blushing. He was certain he was at least gawking at her. This is what Alya and Nino meant about her destroying him, right?

“You—Mari—Chat—*what*?” He stuttered.

For some unknown reason, Alya elbowed Marinette in the stomach and looked smug, like she’d just been proven right. However, she didn’t give Adrien a chance to dwell on that, as she said, “It’s ‘We Love Chat Noir Day.’ Mari came up with it. She said that Chat didn’t get as much love and appreciation as Ladybug, so she organised it. It’s a day to celebrate the best cat in Paris and we’re gonna make it an annual thing.”

He turned to Marinette, at a loss for words. She organised this? A whole day full of people loving and appreciating him?

Adrien felt tears building in his eyes.

“Whoa, bro, you okay?” Nino asked, looking concerned.

“I’m fine,” he choked out.

Oh great, now he even sounded like he was crying.

“What’s wrong?” Alya seemed worried.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Really. It’s just—”

He was cut off by Marinette putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said soothingly, “come with me.” She turned to their two best friends. “It’s okay, I got this. We’ll be back.”

Before anyone could protest, she herded him into the school and out of sight. Adrien didn’t really focus on where she was leading him, until he found himself on the school roof.

Why in the world had she taken him there?

“You and I talk best when we’re alone on rooftops,” she said.

What did *that* mean?

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have organised this day if I knew it would upset you.”

Adrien was shaking his head before she even finished speaking. “No! No, I love it! I’m not upset, I’m just a bit overwhelmed. I didn’t—I wasn’t expecting so many people to like Chat Noir so much.”

“You need to have a higher opinion of yourself, *Chaton*. The city literally made a statue of us.”

“I know, I know, I—” Adrien cut himself off as her words registered in his mind. “What did you say?”

“Did you like the croissants?” She asked, completely disregarding his question, or how white in the face Adrien had become.

“The what?” He weakly croaked.

“I see you liked the scarf. I’m glad you do. I worked really hard on that and stayed up late for days.”

Adrien stared at her blankly. His brain was taking in what she was saying but he wasn’t making the connection. He couldn’t be understanding what she was saying properly, because it seemed like she was saying—

Like she was—

With shaking hands, he grasped her by the shoulders. “Marinette, are you—are you actually saying…” He trailed off, unafraid to voice the conclusion he’d come to. Because if he was right, Marinette was his Lady and that was the most incredible thing he’d ever heard. But if he was wrong…God, he didn’t want to be wrong.

“I told you I had another surprise for you,” she said, opening the purse that was at her hip.

A pink blur flew out of the bag and then a ladybug-esque looking kwami was floating between them. “Hello, Adrien!” The creature greeted. “It’s nice to finally meet you. I hope Plagg hasn’t been giving you trouble.”

Adrien just gaped at the kwami and Marinette. He couldn’t talk; his brain was in shut down mode.

“Tikki, spots on.”

Marinette was engulfed in pink light and in her place stood Ladybug.

He was right: Marinette was his Lady.

The tears that he’d been holding in started streaming down his face. “*Buginette*,” he sniffed, “it’s *you*.”

A far cry from how composed she’d been moments before, his partner now looked panicked at his tears. “Oh, no, Adrien—Chat—please don’t cry! Or at least please tell me those are happy tears and not sad ones because I’m Ladybug. I mean, I know it might be a bit of a surprise, cause I’m a bit of a mess sometimes, but it's me. A-And I wanted to show you how much you mean to me and I thought that telling you who I was would be the best present I could possibly give y—"

Adrien pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her shoulder. Overcome with emotion, all he could get out was, "Marinette, I'm so glad it's you."

There was a flash of pink as she detransformed. Adrien felt Plagg zip out of his pocket and guessed that he'd gone to catch up with Tikki. However, Marinette distracted him from thinking of their kwamis by wrapping her arms around him.

"I'm glad it's you too, Adrien."

He lifted his head from her should to ask, "How did you know?"

"I saw you change back after a fight; it really threw me for a loop."

Well, that explained her recent strange behaviour.

"What did you mean when you said you've been trying to tell me something?"

"I love you," she told him. Plain and simple, like it was an accepted fact of the world: Grass was green, the sky was blue, and she loved him. "Wow, that feels good to say! I love you, Adrien, Chat Noir, whatever you want to call yourself. I could never say it because I would always get so nervous and tongue tied around you. I kept pushing you away as Chat because I loved you as Adrien, and oh jeez, I'm rambling!"

He was still in tears, but that did nothing to damper his beaming smile. "It's okay—just—Mari, do you have any idea what this week has been like? You kept showering me with praise and with presents and I seriously thought I was going to die. Then you kept being super cute as your normal self and I had no idea how to handle that. Now you've organised an entire day for me and you're wearing my costume and oh my god I want to kiss you. Argh, now *I'm* rambling! I'm rambling and I'm crying and I love you."

He drew breath to keep talking and tell her how wonderful she was. To continue on with his *I love you, I love you, I love you*, because Marinette was right, it felt good to say. However, he didn't get the chance. Marinette leant in and further conversation was halted as she pressed her lips to his.

Adrien melted into it. His eyes closed and his hands were at her waist, holding her to him. Marinette's hands were buried in his hair and her lips were as soft as he always imagined them to be. One kiss turned to two, three, four, until Adrien lost count.

How many times had he envisioned this moment? To find out who was under his Lady's mask and to find out his love was reciprocated? Adrien was happy to say that reality was far better than anything he had ever dreamt up.

The moment was effectively ruined by the school bell ringing and the sound of students going off to class. The pair of them groaned as they reluctantly pulled away from each other.

"Class time, *Chaton*," Marinette said.

Dazed and lovestruck from what had just occurred, he asked, "Do we have to?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"We can continue this later though, right?"

"Definitely, yes. I—I would like that."

She held her hand out for him to take and he grasped it instantly. In a very Chat Noir move, he pressed a kiss to it. "I look forward to it, then."

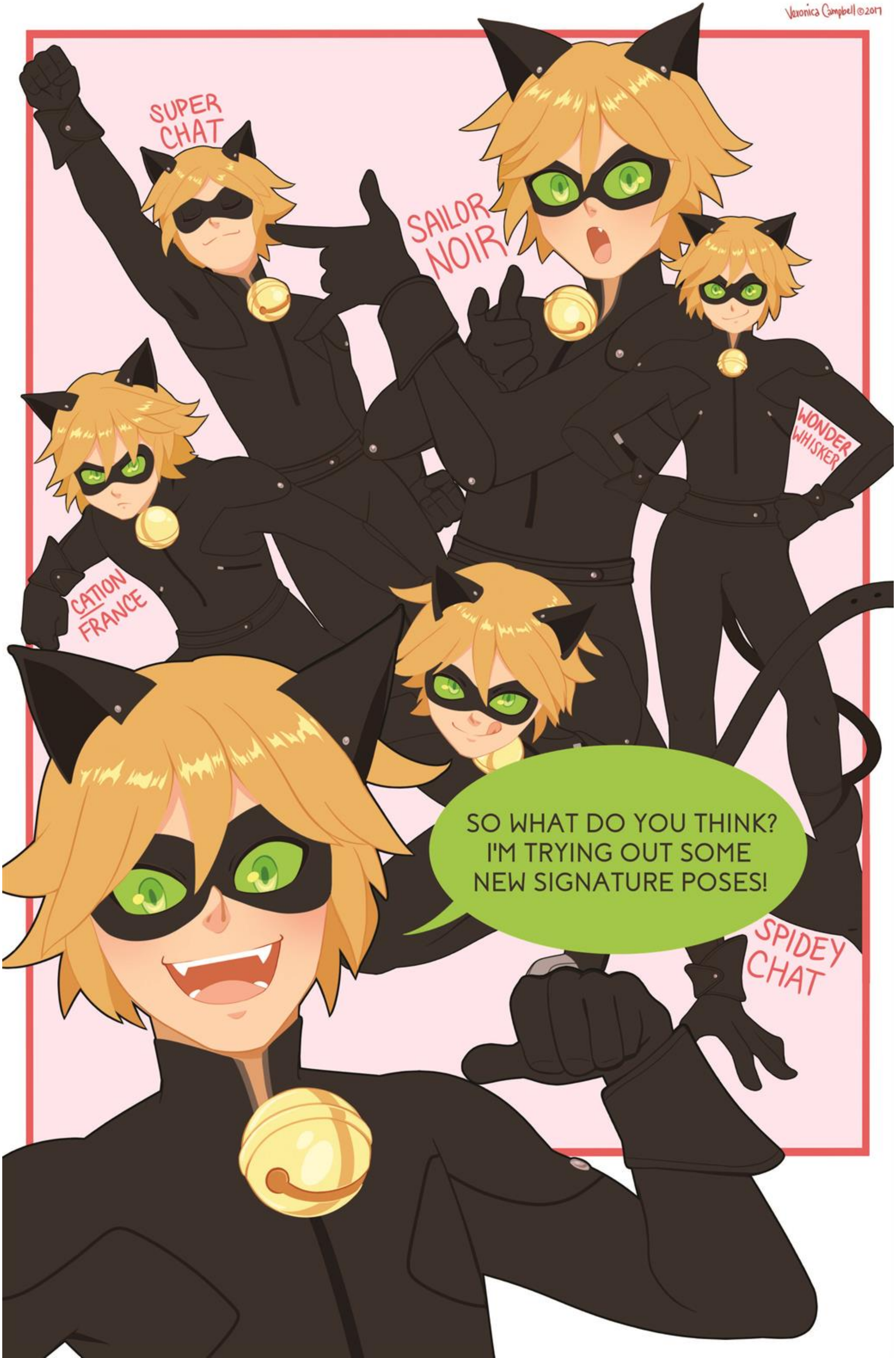
He was rewarded with a spectacular blush from Marinette. "I—you—you," she stammered, clearly flustered. "Oh, come on, you silly cat!" She dragged him towards the stairs and Adrien followed her without complaint, beaming the entire time.

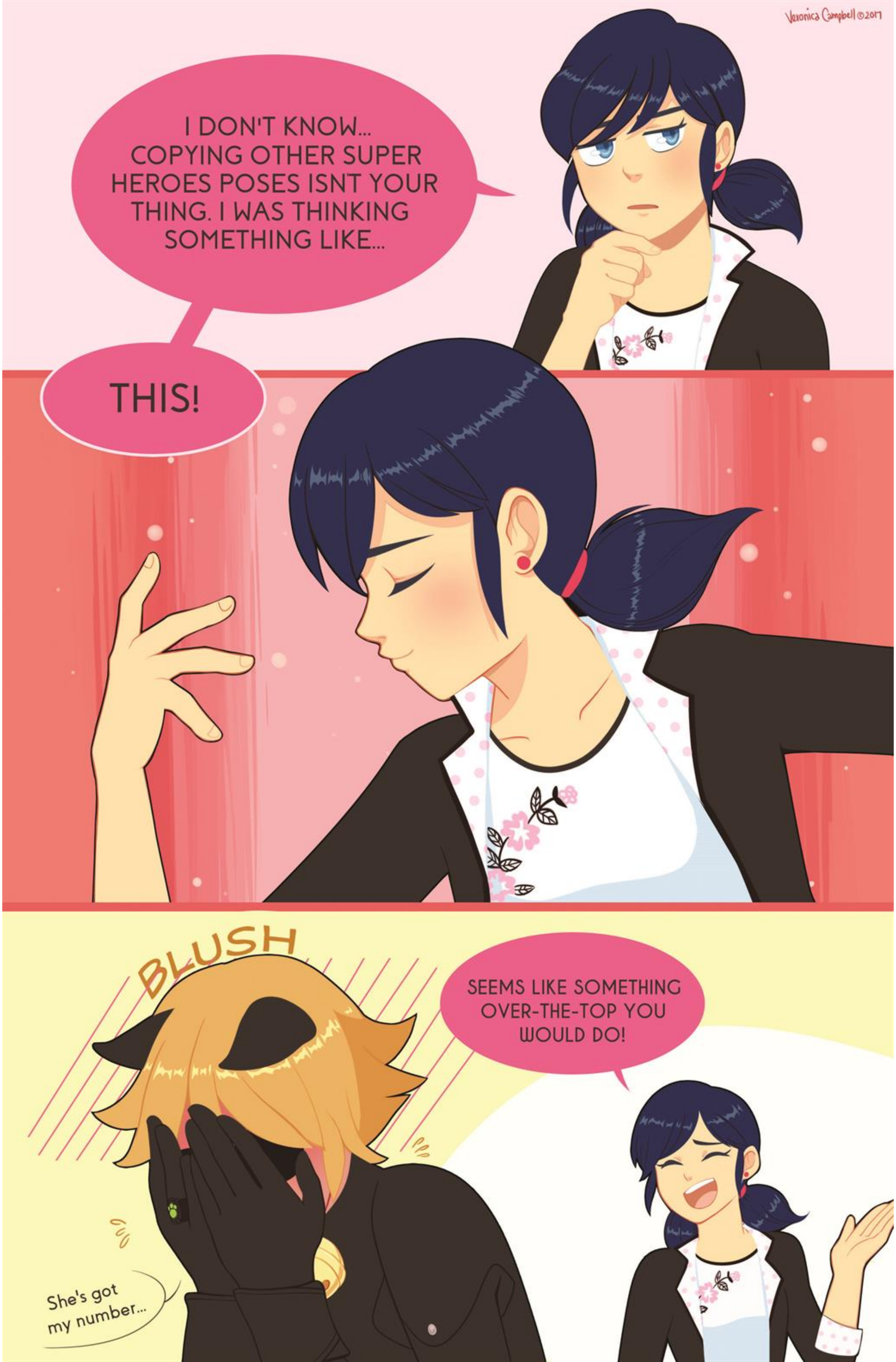
Sure, they were quite possibly going to be late for class (but that was nothing new), and they had to lie to Alya and Nino about why Adrien had been crying. Plus, they'd have to give a reason for his and Marinette's newfound relationship (not that they'd discussed anything, but after love confessions, relationships were a given, right?).

So yes, things were possibly about to get a lot more complicated. But with Marinette at his side, Adrien was ready to tackle it all.

-Khaleisey

CHAT
NOIR


Veronica Campbell ©2017
SUPER CHAT
SAILOR NOIR
WONDER WHISKER
CATION FRANCE
SO WHAT DO YOU THINK? I'M TRYING OUT SOME NEW SIGNATURE POSES!
SPIDEY CHAT


Veronica Campbell ©2017
I DON'T KNOW... COPYING OTHER SUPER HEROES POSES ISNT YOUR THING. I WAS THINKING SOMETHING LIKE...
THIS!
BLUSH
SEEMS LIKE SOMETHING OVER-THE-TOP YOU WOULD DO!
She's got my number...

Lia-Brisa

LIMEY
EmJohnson '17

A Matter of Self-Worth

The sunlight was blinding after the battle. His entire body burnt on exhaustion, and his joints protested at every movement he made. Even raising his arm to run his hand through his wild locks hurt. The last Akuma battle had been brutal, and he had become once again the villain's favorite punch bag.

He was so going to regret it in the morning.

Rolling his shoulders, he looked at the skies with a resigned smile. He had messed up once again. Somehow, he had managed to mess up every single plan Ladybug had carefully threaded, making it more difficult to purify the butterfly than usual, winding them out. And then it was when he failed to protect his Lady.

It'd happened too fast. First, he was parrying the Akuma, and in a blink of the eye, the yellow and red villain was striking Ladybug, who was too focused on getting the akumatised object to notice on time. She couldn't avoid it or counter it, so she received the full blow.

Seeing her sprawled on the floor, stunned, and with blood on her lip made him snap. He didn't remember much of what happened next, but when he regained his senses, the Akuma was beaten, sprawled on the floor, and Ladybug was purifying the butterfly. Before the swarm of magical ladybugs could reach to her, though, he saw again the blood dripping from her lower lip, and the beginning of a bruise on her cheek.

He turned around, ashamed of himself. He had *one* job, and that was to protect his Lady at all costs, and he didn't even manage to do that right. It hadn't been the first time, and, Chat added darkly, he was sure it wouldn't be the last.

"Chat?"

He spun around, startled. Ladybug was looking at him, brows furrowed in concern and head cocked slightly to the side. Her cheeks were rosy again, without a trace of a punch in there, and her lower lip, once bright red because of the blood pouring from it, pursed slightly, as pink and delicate as always.

And then, after minutes of looking at her face, he noticed the fist raised towards him, waiting patiently for her partner to bump it. Hesitant, he raised his own and met her halfway, the bump being so soft that Ladybug almost didn't feel his touch against her knuckles. Her frown deepened at that, and as she opened up her mouth, about to comment on it, her miraculous beeped furiously, showing she had just one minute before her transformation faded. She instinctively brought her hand to her ear, tugging the earring softly.

Chat Noir cleared his throat, smiling at his partner. He hoped his smile wasn't as wonky as he felt it.

"It seems we have run out of time again, huh. Well, I guess it's time to leave." He turned away, dropping his painful smile, and got ready to leap away, when-

"Wait!"

He turned his head, startled. Ladybug was fidgeting in her feet, her hand stretched towards him, as if trying to grab him. She pulled back her hand, and bit her lip in hesitation.

"… Are you free tonight?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why?"

"Meet me at Notre Dame at ten."

Then, with a flick of her wrist, she threw her yoyo to the skies and secured her grip on one of the nearby lampposts. She skyrocketed towards Paris' rooftops, instantly getting out of sight despite of her bright costume. Being reminded that he didn't have much time left himself, he also fled the scene before more reporters got to him.

After vaulting around the rooftops, he let himself drop into a dark alley seconds before his transformation faded, and Plagg was expelled from his ring, shaking his head dizzily. However, instead of moaning for cheese, as always, he just floated to Adrien's inside pocket and let himself fall inside, not muttering a word.

Adrien looked at his shirt worriedly. "Plagg, are you okay?"

Said kwami popped his head out of the cloth, and glared half-heartedly at him. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You didn't moan for your cheese as usual."

"You could give me my dear Camembert without me having to moan until exhaustion, couldn't you? Moreover, I'm trying to recover as much energy as possible. You have a date tonight, don't you?"

"It's not a date. I…" He scratched his neck, uncomfortable. "I'm not exactly sure why Ladybug wants to meet up, to be honest. Maybe it's because of today, in order to talk about how many times I messed up today and how I have risked both of our identities. Maybe she wants more time to scold me for my incompetence."

Plagg stared at him with big, droopy green eyes, blinking slowly. "You know Adrien… you are very intelligent, but sometimes you can be really stupid. She won't scold you. She's not like that. Now chin up, give me my cheese and let's go home. You've got a long night ahead of you."

Adrien complied and got out of the alley. His mind, however, couldn't stop repeating the prior fight, highlighting every point where he had screwed up. And, for the first time in his life, he dreaded to meet his Lady.

.-.-.-.-.-.

Although he'd hoped with all his strength that time slowed down, night came way too soon. The crescent moon illuminated the dark rooftops, shadows dancing with the twinkling of the little number of stars that could be seen in the big city's sky.

Chat Noir made his way to Notre Dame slowly, his heart pounding uncomfortably against his chest, and his guts knotted with nerves. His steps were light against the black tiles of the roofs, and no one saw the leather-clad superhero heading towards one of the most visited touristic spots of the city.

With acrobatics that probably defied at least some physics' laws, Chat Noir landed silently on the cathedral's roof. The lights of the city of love greeted him back, the characteristic layout of the Eiffel Tower at the background, and there, at the edge of the building, was sitting the girl that had been the main character of his wandering thoughts and daydreaming for months.

However, that time he didn't join her at the edge. He didn't even make his presence known, content to just watching her back, the brightness of her suit dimmed by the low light.

There was something different in how she looked right at that moment. He couldn't really explain how, but right there, where the eyes of the world were focused in everything but her, the moon being the only one looking back, she wasn't Ladybug, protector of Paris, carrier of the miraculous of creation. She was just a girl enjoying the night lights, the girl he had fallen for all this time ago.

Chat Noir felt the knots in his stomach loosening up a bit.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" Ladybug said without turning back.

"It is."

Ladybug stretched, a soft whining sound slipping past her lips. Once she relaxed again, resting her open palms on the cold stone, she turned her head slightly, just enough to look at him from the corner of her eyes.

"Come here, Chaton. There's enough room for the both of us."

He did as he was told, and he slowly made his way to her side. The view was even more amazing from there, with the city directly underneath them. They were conveniently covered from the public eye by one of the gargoyles, its stone eyes looking directly down. Altogether, it felt like they were in a tiny bubble, and no one could get to them there.

"Whenever I struggle to deal with my double life, I just run around mindlessly. Then, when I've burnt all my pent-up anger, I choose the highest roof in sight and stay there for a while, looking at Paris skyline. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." She breathed deeply. "I feel so fortunate to be able to enjoy it like I do. Not everyone can say they soar the skies on a daily basis."

He felt the corners of his mouth going up at her comment. It was so easy to ignore everything else, just focusing on her words.

"I don't think *even you* can say that to anyone else."

She laughed. "Touché."

Silence fell between the two of them, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one. As used as they were to meet in the middle of a fight, where puns and flirting and battle strategies flew between them effortlessly, and there wasn't a minute to sit down, they both appreciated the rare moments of calmness. They were moments where they could slow down, take a breath, and to be reminded of their accomplishments.

"… say, Chaton, what happened to you today?"

He flinched at her question, and his whole body stiffened. He didn't know why, but he felt like he was in the middle of battle, and blows could come from any direction. His mind wandered back to that afternoon, going through the battle yet again, and his jaw clenched.

"I got distracted and the Akuma took me by surprise. It won't happen again."

"Never mind that. I meant at the end of the battle. You weren't moving, and you weren't answering to me. I got worried." She turned to look at him with concern. "Were you wounded? My Miraculous Cure should have healed you… it healed mine at least-"

That got him flinching again, but he hoped she hadn't noticed. However, by the way she was looking at him, concern now tinted with curiosity, he wasn't that lucky. He stayed quiet, failing to come up with something to direct her thoughts elsewhere. Even with his infinite collection of puns and pick-up lines, he didn't know what to say.

She turned around, facing him fully, and she prodded him with her foot, asking him to do the same.

"Chat, look at me."

He didn't.

"Chat, tell me what's wrong. I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong."

"There's nothing wrong."

"Liar. You haven't called me by any of my nicknames. You haven't flirted with me, and have you seen where we're sitting at? At one of the most romantic places of the whole Paris. And you haven't made a single pun since we defeated the Akuma."

"… *you*."

"Huh?"

"Since *you* defeated the Akuma. I was useless back there."

She frowned. "What are you talking about? You were the one who seized him. If it hadn't been for you we would still be fighting him."

"If it wasn't *for me*?" He turned this time, fuming. "What did I do today, if not messing up every one of your plans? Either I get mind-controlled by the Akuma, don't get there in time or I just get in the way of your plans. I'm totally useless. Even today when you…"

"When I…?"

He lowered his head, and swallowed down the lump in his throat. "When you… I…" He clenched his fists, the feeling of ineptness coming back to him with great force. "The Akuma. I… I failed to stop him. he lunged at you too fast and… I couldn't protect you. I swore to be your shield, and I can't manage to do even that. I'm unworthy of my Miraculous."

Suddenly, he felt soft fingers reaching for his chin and forcing him to look up. Ladybug tugged him closer, holding him at eye-level. He was startled to see anger burning in those deep blue eyes.

"Wha…"

"You listen to me, Chat Noir," she snarled, and adjusted her grip so she was cradling his face with her two hands. "You better stop thinking like this, because all you've said right now is complete rubbish. Every single one of my plans would've fallen apart if it hadn't been for you, whether you were consciously helping or not. You put your life in the line in every single battle, and your dedication to our mission is admirable. I couldn't ask for a better partner."

"But still they hurt you today, and it's my fault."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm no china doll, Chaton. I'm not going to break that easily. So, stop being my shield, and start being my partner! I know you have my back, so let me have yours. You're one of my best friends, and I want to protect you just the same. You're important to me."

"I'm sorry-"

She shook her head. "Don't apologize. Just- stay with me, okay? You're the only one I trust with my life. You're the reason I'm Ladybug."

"But if someone else had gotten the ring before me-"

"Then someone else would be Ladybug too."

"What do you mean?"

She let go of his face, and sighed. "Remember Stoneheart? When people started turning into copies of the Akuma, I thought I had really messed up. I felt useless, just as you're feeling right now. So, I ignored my kwami and removed my Miraculous, determined to give them to my best friend. She's a fanatic of superheroes and has a strong will. She is superhero material, while, beside her, I was pretty normal, too skittish and hesitant. The red costume suited her better."

She turned her head to the side, looking at the city lights wistfully.

"I managed to hide them in her bag, but she got trapped at the second wave of attack. So, I retrieved the earrings, willing to transform just one more time to save her, and then giving them up. But then you came." She turned again to look at him, this time with one of the most beautiful smiles he had ever seen. "You picked me up when I was at my lowest, giving me the confidence to keep going on, despite I was completely terrified. It was only because of you that we managed to defeat Stoneheart. And it's only because of you that I kept on being Ladybug, something that I love. So, thank you. I owe you my life. Paris owes you."

Chat Noir felt the tears prickling at the corner of his eyes. He blinked to cast them away, but only more of them came. His chest was tight, but only relief and happiness filled him. He felt so fortunate to have her by his side.

Two red-clad arms embraced him, pushing him against Ladybug's body. He buried his head against her shoulder, his tears falling freely now. His arms rested on her back, pushing her even closer. She chuckled softly, and began playing with his wild hair.

"Ah, I hate it when you say you don't deserve to be Chat Noir. I wish I could smack your face every time you think that."

"I spent most of my time as an innocent civilian, my Lady." He smiled against her. If he had looked up, he would have seen her smile gleefully, relieved to be hearing her calling by a nickname again.

"Well, I'd love to smack that face too." He looked up, surprised at her words. She rolled her eyes. "Come on, you think you're the only one curious to know who their partner is out of costume? I've thought about it a million times, even talked about it with Tikki, but both agreed the best option was to stay secret, for our protection." She scoffed. "Although at times like this, I question my judgement back then."

He gaped at her. "You… you want to know who I am?"

"Of course I do! I'm dying of curiosity. Every time I go out I'm looking at my surroundings, wondering where you could be, or if I would recognise you in the crowd. Are you a total stranger, or are you closer than I thought? Which are your hobbies? Your aspirations? I'm dying to know." She sighed. "But we can't, not until Hawk Moth is defeated. At least that's what Tikki says." She grumbled, in an afterthought.

"So, when we kick Hawk Moth's butt, whenever that is… we'll be revealing ourselves?"

She nodded. "I promise." She paused. "Or…"

"Or…?"

"Maybe… if there wasn't any other way… we could reveal ourselves before that. Only if it's the only solution and our partner needs us. I would be fine telling you who I am then."

"Okay."

She blinked. "You're fine with it?"

"I'm ecstatic, if that's what you're asking."

She giggled at that, and he couldn't help but join her. However, the bells of the cathedral tolled soon afterwards, and Ladybug cursed under her breath.

"It's midnight already, and I haven't finished my homework for tomorrow." She groaned. "I'll have to pull out another all-nighter."

"Well, you can tell your teacher you couldn't do your homework because you were busy saving the city. She won't be able to say anything against that."

"I wish I could, Chaton. My life would be much easier."

She disentangled herself from his grip and stood up. She reached for her yoyo and unclasped it from around her hips, giving it an experimental twirl. However, before jumping off the building, she looked down at him.

"Hey, you know you can contact me if you need someone, right?"

"I will." He nodded, smiling at her. She nodded back, satisfied with his answer.

"Well, I'm off. You better go home soon too, Chaton. Think of poor me doing maths homework when you go to bed tonight."

"I can do that. I'm always thinking of you, after all, bugaboo."

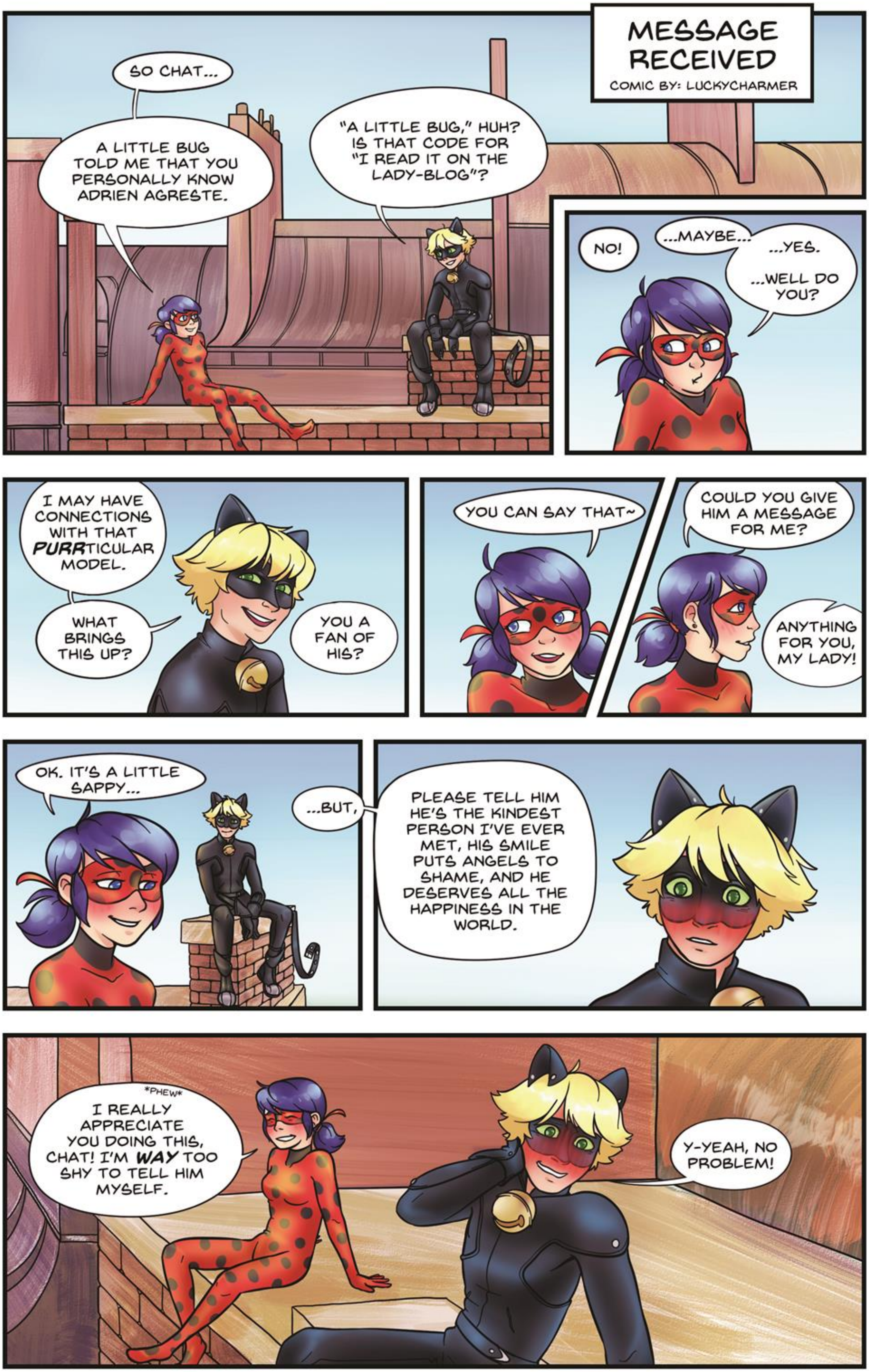
She rolled her eyes teasingly, and with a wave of her hand, she jumped off the cathedral, soaring the skies with elegance. Chat Noir watched her go, a soft smile in his lips, until he couldn't see her anymore. Then, he got up, stretched his muscles and followed her example, taking his time to get home. The lights of the city seemed brighter, somehow, and the embrace of the night inviting. He breathed deeply, and exhaled softly.

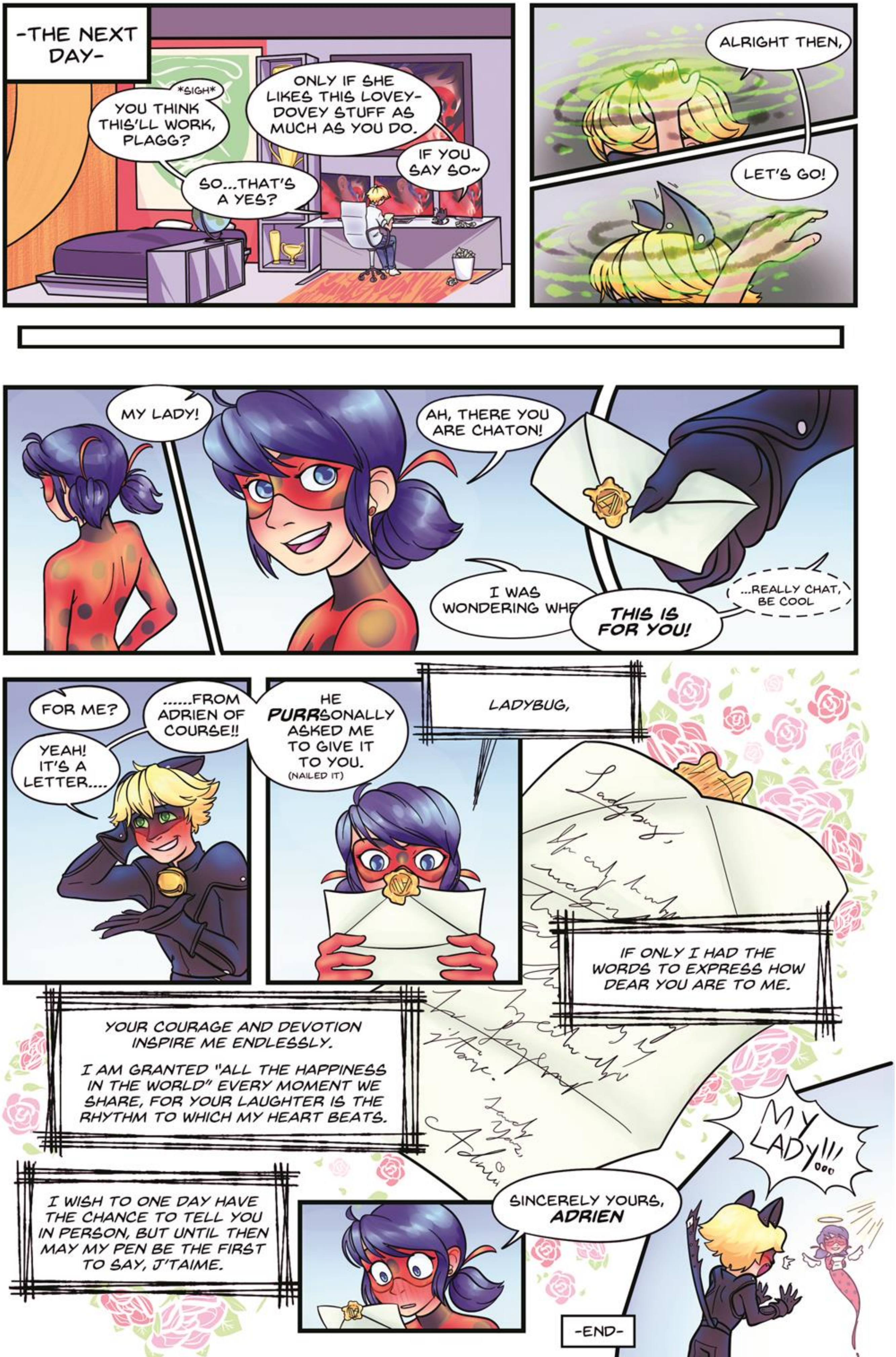
He was glad to be Chat Noir. And if being Chat Noir meant Ladybug would be by his side, he hoped he was Chat Noir for all his life.

-Livinglittlelie

MESSAGE RECEIVED

COMIC BY: LUCKYCHARMER


SO CHAT...
A LITTLE BUG TOLD ME THAT YOU PERSONALLY KNOW ADRIEN AGRESTE.
"A LITTLE BUG," HUH? IS THAT CODE FOR "I READ IT ON THE LADY-BLOG"?
NO!
...MAYBE...
...YES.
...WELL DO YOU?
I MAY HAVE CONNECTIONS WITH THAT PURRTICULAR MODEL.
WHAT BRINGS THIS UP?
YOU A FAN OF HIS?
YOU CAN SAY THAT~
COULD YOU GIVE HIM A MESSAGE FOR ME?
ANYTHING FOR YOU, MY LADY!
OK. IT'S A LITTLE SAPPY...
...BUT,
PLEASE TELL HIM HE'S THE KINDEST PERSON I'VE EVER MET, HIS SMILE PUTS ANGELS TO SHAME, AND HE DESERVES ALL THE HAPPINESS IN THE WORLD.
PHEW
I REALLY APPRECIATE YOU DOING THIS, CHAT! I'M WAY TOO SHY TO TELL HIM MYSELF.
Y-YEAH, NO PROBLEM!


-THE NEXT DAY-
SIGH
YOU THINK THIS'LL WORK, PLAGG?
ONLY IF SHE LIKES THIS LOVEY-DOVEY STUFF AS MUCH AS YOU DO.
SO...THAT'S A YES?
IF YOU SAY SO~
ALRIGHT THEN,
LET'S GO!
MY LADY!
AH, THERE YOU ARE CHATON!
I WAS WONDERING WHE
THIS IS FOR YOU!
...REALLY CHAT, BE COOL
FOR ME?
YEAH! IT'S A LETTER....
......FROM ADRIEN OF COURSE!!
HE PURRSONALLY ASKED ME TO GIVE IT TO YOU.
(NAILED IT)
LADYBUG,
IF ONLY I HAD THE WORDS TO EXPRESS HOW DEAR YOU ARE TO ME.
YOUR COURAGE AND DEVOTION INSPIRE ME ENDLESSLY.
I AM GRANTED "ALL THE HAPPINESS IN THE WORLD" EVERY MOMENT WE SHARE, FOR YOUR LAUGHTER IS THE RHYTHM TO WHICH MY HEART BEATS.
I WISH TO ONE DAY HAVE THE CHANCE TO TELL YOU IN PERSON, BUT UNTIL THEN MAY MY PEN BE THE FIRST TO SAY, J'TAIME.
SINCERELY YOURS, ADRIEN
MY LADY!!!
-END-

lUNECAKE

Meow Meow Meow Meow
#1 Lady Bug Fan
LUNELLE

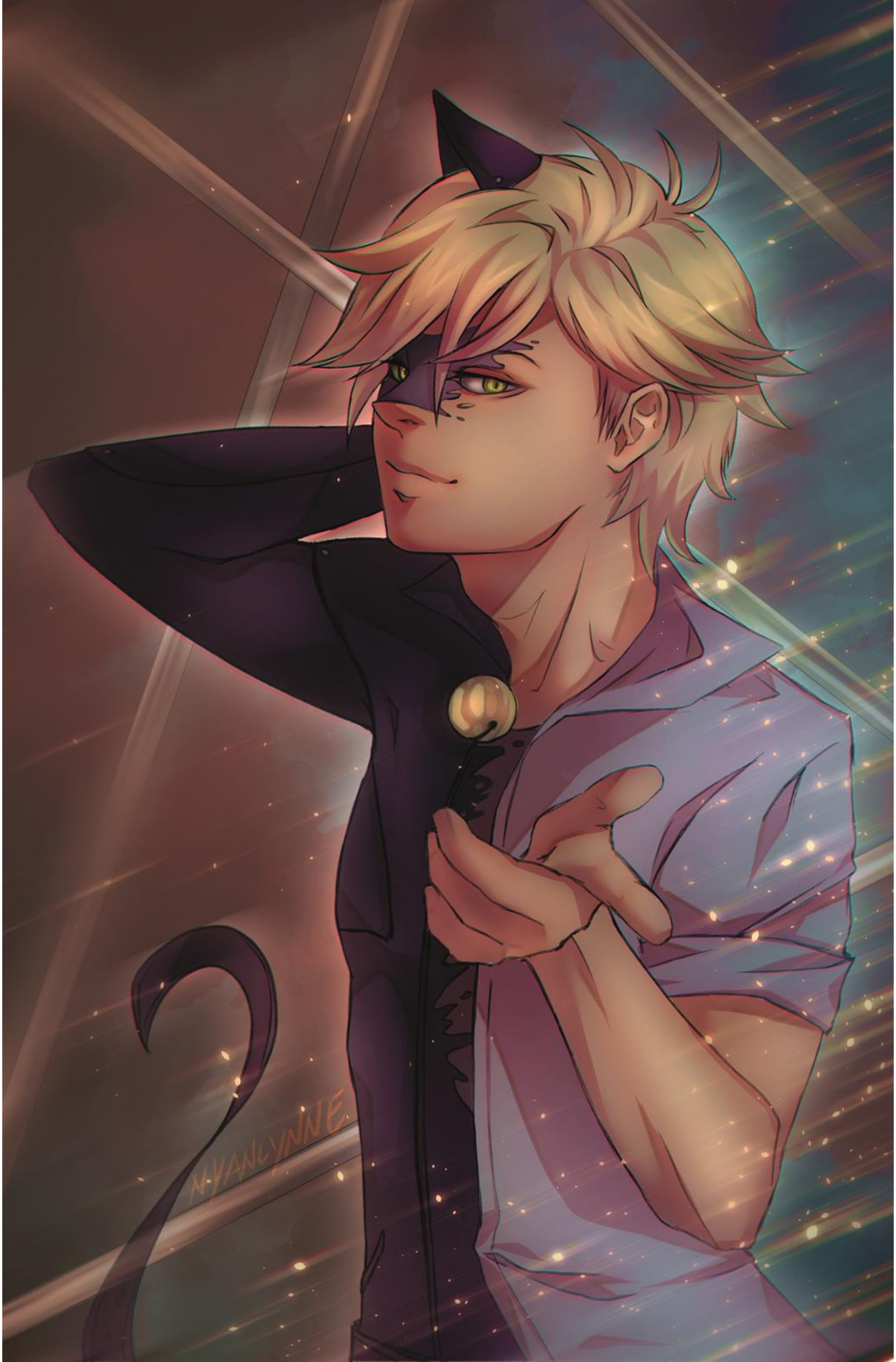
mari-monsta.tumblr.com
maris-art-portfolio.tumblr.com
DO NOT REPOST

Minimuii.tumblr.com

To: My Lady
moonviewer@tumblr

NALCIEL.TUMBLR.COM

Nicarette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@QookyQuiche

Catnaps and Coffee Chats

When Nino came into work today he was not expecting a superhero snoozing beneath a table.

Sure enough, Chat Noir himself, blond hair bedraggled and drool clinging to his lip, was curled up under the shade of the table, purring softly right alongside the cat nestled against him.

Was Nino still drunk? Last night was crazy but could it be 'hallucinating a superhero sleeping under a table' crazy?

"Marinette," Nino sighed, rubbing his temples slowly. "Please tell me you also see Chat Noir sleeping under our outdoor seating."

Marinette, eyes bleary as she leaned heavily against her hostess podium, gave him a week smile. "I see him too."

"Oh, thank god." Nino mumbled, grabbing his broom. "When did you come in?"

She gave him a blunt look.

"Yeah, me too." Nino pressed his cheek against the broom, the wood pressing splinters into his cheek which provided a wake-up call he desperately needed.

"Did you find Adrien last night?" Marinette buried her hands in her face, eyes shut.

"No," the mention of Adrien left his heart racing. "I hope he made it home okay."

"Not picking up his phone?" she mumbled.

"Nah." he worried at his lip before sweeping the cafe. The repetitive back and forth was almost therapeutic had it not been for the superhero in his way.

Nino stood there, shifting his weight back and forth, an internal battle plaguing his mind. *Should I wake him? That doesn't seem polite. Maybe he's tired. I'm tired. Maybe I shouldn't bother him? I'm... not gonna wake him.*

In Nino's attempt to actually do his job, he swept dust away from Chat, minding his broom as best he could. The bristles gently brushed against Chat's nose, making it twitch softly before he returned to his soft snoring.

Nino managed to sweep the whole cafe twice, only missing a foot radius around Chat. He sighed resorting to gently prodding Chat with the end of the broom.

Still asleep.

Curiosity tugging at him, Nino poked again.

Still asleep and snoring even louder.

Nino snorted to himself, prodding Chat a little harsher.

This time green eyes shot open, startling a scream out of Nino's throat.

Nino rapidly turned his attention back to sweeping around the snoozing hero as said hero lifted his head.

From the corner of his eye Nino caught Chat rubbing his eyes sleepily before glancing down at his gloved hand with green eyes whose color made his heart flutter inexplicably.

Chat sighed softly, blowing his bangs from his face before sweeping up the cat who was also rudely awakened. He touched his nose to the cat's fur before mumbling a muffled, "Nino?"

Nino spun on his heel, feeling his face heat rapidly. "Hey, man."

Chat blinked sleepy green eyes at him before turning his attention to the second cat gently pawing at his knee. "Cat cafe?"

Nino nodded. "You feeling okay?"

Chat sighed. "'My head hurts. Had a wild night."

Nino chuckled dryly. "Join the club. Why did you end up sleeping on the floor of a cafe?"

"My life is in shambles?" Chat shrugged, the corner of his lip turned up in a barely there smile.

"Yup sounds about right." Nino smiled, face still blazing. "Need some tea?"

Chat stood up shakily, trailed by four other cats. "Please."

Nino sat across Chat, watching him in awe as he shoved croissant after croissant down his throat with no pause for breath.

Marinette was running rapidly from kitchen to their table, depositing croissants as quickly as she possibly could.

"Hey, man, do you maybe wanna slow down?" Nino bumped Chat gently with his knee beneath the table, something he usually did with Adrien.

Chat paused, mouth full of flaky buttery croissant. "Mubfee oo igh."

Nino blinked at him.

Chat laughed, spewing flecks of croissant on the table before swallowing. "Maybe you're right. I just haven't had a croissant in... months."

An audible Marinette-like gasp could be heard from the kitchen.

Nino laughed. "She's gonna send you off with sixty croissants."

Chat's sigh was dreamy.

"You seem distracted." Nino blurted.

Chat blinked at him.

"I-I mean... is something on your mind? We can talk, and stuff." Nino closed his hand into a fist, trying to fight his blush. *I should* not *be flustered right now, why am I flustered?*

Chat's blond lashes swept over his dark leather mask, revealing eyes greener than summer leaves.

Right- that's why.

"Nah. What about you? You seem worried." Chat popped another piece of croissant past his lips.

Nino, momentarily distracted by Chat Noir's lips, attempted to reply to Chat but all that came out was "Uuh?"

"Are you okay?" Chat raised an eyebrow.

"M-My friend, Adrien. Didn't make it home last night. I hope he's okay," Nino managed to get out.

Something flashed in Chat's eyes. "He's fine."

"How do you know?" Nino asked, leg bouncing incessantly in worry.

Red raced across Chat's cheeks, baffling Nino. "Saw him last night. He got home, no worries."

Relief flooded Nino, making him sag onto the table. "Thank god."

Chat's blush deepened. "Seems like a really close friend."

"He's my best friend."

Chat stood up, mindful of the cats surrounding him. "I should head home! People are probably looking for me. Thanks for the food! I'll drop by and pay for it, I promise!"

"Well okay I-"

Chat rushed out the door, cats yowling after him.

Not ten minutes later, a freshly scrubbed Adrien entered the cafe, blond hair clean yet haphazard and green eyes lacking signs of sleeplessness.

Nino couldn't have been more relieved.

He and Marinette wrapped Adrien in a choking hug which left all three of them giggling.

"You're an idiot, Adrien Agreste." Marinette rolled her eyes, dropping a plate with a freshly baked croissant on it in his hands.

Adrien pressed a kiss to Marinette's hair before turning his green eyes on Nino and grinning.

Nino crossed his arms and tapped his foot like an agitated mother.

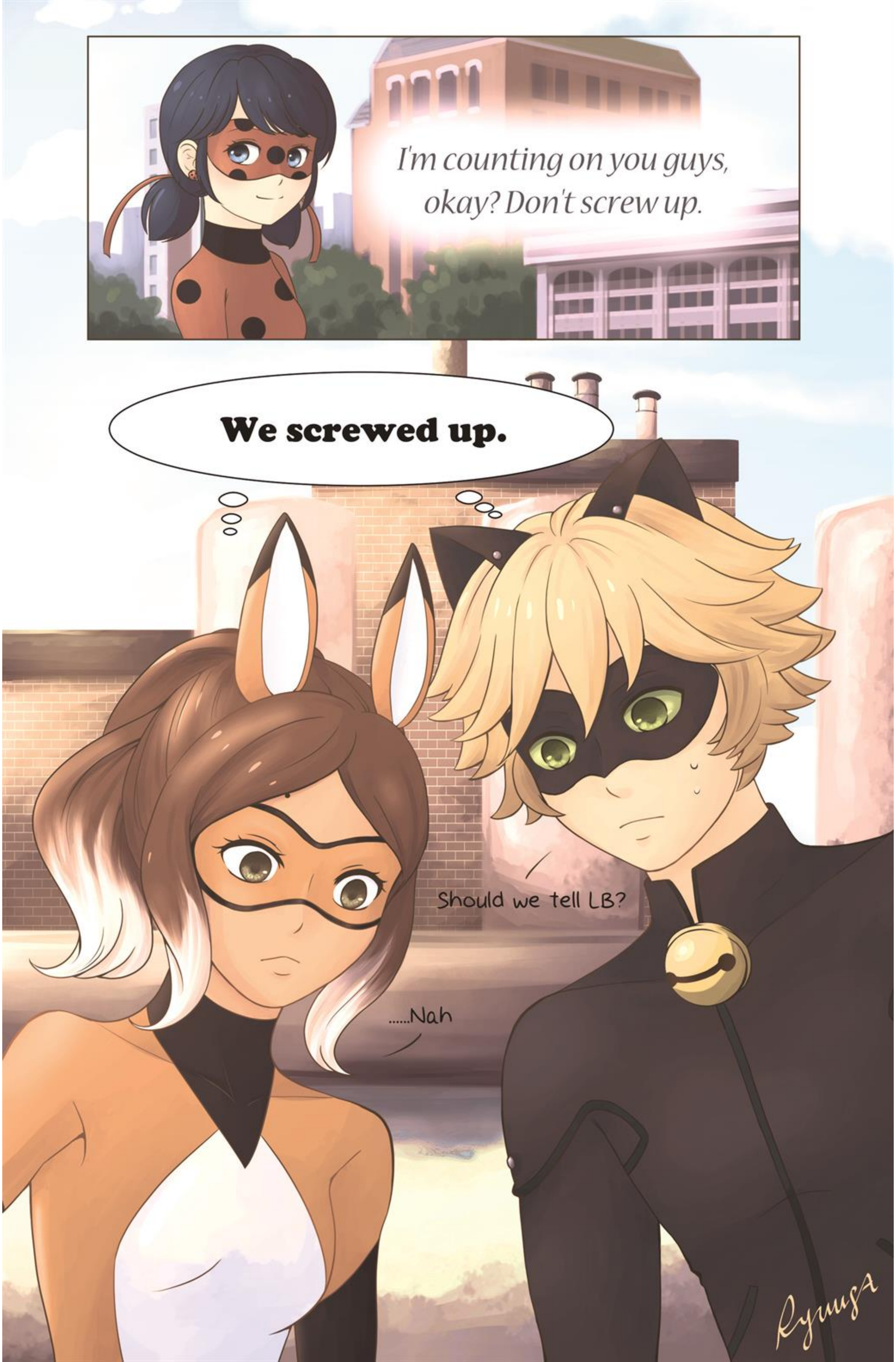
Adrien's expression became apologetic as he batted his eyes at Nino.

Nino sighed, wrapping Adrien up in another hug. "I was worried."

"Thank you. At least someone is." Adrien shrugged pressing a kiss to Nino's cheek.

Nino blushed, not at all reading into the kiss for now. He was just happy his friend was safe and not sleeping under a table in a random cafe in Paris.

-reyxa


I'm counting on you guys, okay? Don't screw up.
We screwed up.
Should we tell LB?
......Nah

Falling Sun

Chloé decides to spend the night on her balcony. Not the whole night, that'd be ridiculous, she could never sleep with the sounds of the city so loud, but just a few hours. She actually watches the sunset for once, which is nice and pretty and probably emotionally moving or something, and pretends to do a few homework problems. She told herself she'd start being better about that.

After a while, she finds herself staring off to the horizon, the skyline of the city permanently burned into her memory. She blinks in surprise when something on that horizon starts moving.

Chloé squints into the growing darkness as the slightly darker thing starts moving closer. It takes her an almost embarrassingly long time to realize it's not just a thing, it's Chat Noir.

Strange for him to be out, he doesn't usually patrol on Thursdays, and there haven't been any sounds of akuma.

She calls out to him when he's close enough that he'll hear her with his freaky cat ears. "Hey! Noir!"

Chat pauses and then leaps a few rooftops closer to her. He hesitates before making the final leap to her balcony. "Can I help you with something?" he asks, crouching on the railing.

Chloé tilts her head. "What are you doing?"

Chat narrows his eyes. "…patrol?"

"You never patrol on Thursdays," she says with a flip of her hair. "As Ladybug's biggest fan, I would know."

Chat rolls his eyes and Chloé pretends not to notice.

"I wanted to," he says. "There's no law against taking an extra patrol."

Ladybug might say otherwise. In the past few weeks, Ladybug has been a lot harsher about the other heroes taking patrols. Chloé assumes it's because there's been so many akuma attacks lately, but it's still annoying. Chloé just purses her lips instead of commenting.

"Besides," Chat continues. "Who wouldn't want to see the hero of Paris during the most romantic time of night?"

Chloé raises her eyebrows. "Ladybug is out?"

He sits down on the railing. "Wow. First of all, rude. Second of all, gay."

She shrugs. "Two things I'm known for."

Chat snorts. "Fair enough. Would you rather watch this beautiful sunset with Ladybug?" He gestures to the sky behind him.

Chloé stares at the setting sun for a long moment before she shakes her head. "I'm good."

He blinks in surprise. "Okay, that…was not what I was expecting."

She smirks. "I live to be unpredictable."

Chat stretches his arms to the sky. "Why are you out? I never see you out."

"Maybe I thought *I* would grace the city with my presence. You aren't the only loved one around here." A smile pulls at the corner of her lips. "You and I are more alike than you think."

"Blond and attention seeking?" Chat jokes.

Chloé mimes shoving him off the railing. "No, famous, sought after, and beautiful."

"Aww you think I'm pretty?" Chat asks, batting his eyes.

"Duh." Chloé rolls her eyes. "I only talk to pretty people," she says sarcastically.

Chat scoffs.

"You're very pretty," she says seriously. "I don't joke about beauty."

He stares at her for a long moment, with large, unblinking green eyes. She always forgets how captivating his gaze is. "I know you don't," he says softly.

For some reason, she has a strong feeling like they've done this before.

Chloé swallows and looks away. "You sure you just wanted to take an extra patrol tonight?" They rarely take extra patrols, because it means patrolling alone. Patrolling alone is always dull. There's nothing to do other than run around and listen to your own thoughts, it's too late at night for civilians to be out and interested in interacting.

It's another thing entirely when you *want* to be alone with your thoughts.

There's nothing quite like sitting atop Notre Dame and watching the city's lights twinkle below you as you stew in your own thoughts and let them swallow you and eat you whole. It's strangely calming and healing.

Not that Chloé would know.

Chat looks out to the skyline. "I was having a bad night," he murmurs. He rubs his fingers along the edge of his mask where it meets the skin. Chloé wonders if he ever has the strong urge to rip it off like she sometimes does.

Chloé rests her chin in her hand and follows his gaze to the horizon. She's no good at comforting others. If anything, *she's* always the one being comforted. She's trying to get better but— her immediate plan for helping Chat is not one Ladybug would approve of.

And both her and Chat strive for Ladybug's approval too much for that.

"Did you know I ran away once?" Chat says suddenly.

Chloé looks up in surprise. "You mean you aren't running away right now?"

"Ha ha very funny." Chat tugs on one of his ears. "I was nine. I was mad at my dad. I filled a bag with comic books, my Nintendo DS, and candy, and climbed out of my window using a sheet rope."

She frowns. She's heard a similar story before. It must not be that uncommon for kids to run away when they're mad. "I 'ran away' because my parents were getting a divorce," Chloé says when it doesn't seem like Chat's going to continue. "I took my blanket and wrote a really dramatic note that I sealed with wax and left with a rose I stole from one of the vases in the lobby."

"Of course you did," Chat mutters.

Chloé sticks her tongue out at him. "I walked to my friend's house. I was so mad that no one came for me until the next day, and then my parents weren't even that worried. It turns out my friend's mom called my dad and told him where I was." Then Chloé had been mad at Mrs. Agreste, but at least getting away from her parents for a while had helped.

Chat rests his chin on his knees. "I didn't go to anyone. I sort of just…walked around the city."

"Sounds like it'd be nice," Chloé murmurs. "If, you know, you weren't upset. And also nine."

Chat snorts. "True. It turned out okay in the end. A really nice woman who owned a bakery gave me a free pastry and called my mom for me. My mom called my dad and yelled at him."

Chloé raises her eyebrows. "Wow."

He hums. "She was away on a business trip. I just remember…" He shakes his head. "It just all seems kind of pointless sometimes, doesn't it?"

Chloé starts at the sudden subject change. Or maybe not so sudden. It's not like she knows anything about Chat's life. They don't exactly talk, even while she's transformed. This, the whole heart to heart gushy emotions thing, is very new. "What seems pointless?" she asks. "If you start quoting Shakespeare at me, I'm pushing you off my balcony."

He mulls it over for a moment before saying, "I'm not really sure."

She sighs and rests her arms on the railing. "Helpful."

Chat glares at her. "Very comforting."

"Do I seem like a comforting and caring person to you?" she asks, returning his glare?

Chat's expression softens. "I think you could be," he muses. "If you wanted to be."

Chloé narrows her eyes and looks away.

"Can I get deep?" he asks.

"Does it matter if I say no?"

"Isn't everyone capable of kindness?" Chat continues, barely having paused to let her slip in her snarky response. Which Chloé had been expecting. She knows him too well at this point to expect anything less. "Don't all human beings have the ability to be good?"

Chloé resists the urge to scoff. Chat is working through something, right now is not the time to be bitter and cynical. Or at least, it shouldn't be. Despite her best efforts, "My father works in politics" slips out.

"That doesn't make him a bad person," Chat counters. "He still cares about you. At least a little bit," he amends when Chloé makes a face. "He'd tear down half of Paris to keep you safe."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't need him to," she mutters. "Maybe there are other ways he could show me he cares that would mean more to me."

Chat's ears droop. "I know what you mean," he murmurs softly. "My dad doesn't get it either."

Chloé remembers that the women in the bakery called Chat's *mom*, who was away and working, and not Chat's father. Who was still in Paris and should've been taking care of his son. She clenches her fist. "Adults never do."

"And that is the line of thinking that lead to the Bubbler," Chat says with forced enthusiasm.

Chloé tries not to smile.

Chat swishes his tail. "We should probably be trying to learn from history or something like that."

She shrugs. "Have people ever done that? I mean, we keep having wars and stuff. Bad things keep happening. History repeats itself and all that garbage."

"Is it bad that I wish for once we'd just learn?"

Chloé furrows her eyebrows. "Chat Noir are you trying to change all of mankind?" She shifts her weight. "Because I have news for you."

Chat sighs. "I don't know. I just wish people were better."

"Not happening," she says flatly.

"I think you underestimate people," Chat says. "I think people are capable of more than you think." He gives her a once over. "I think *you're* capable of more than you think."

Chloé looks away, cheeks hot. "*I* think you're being dramatic." She bites back the pun on the tip of her tongue.

Chat laughs. It's a little bitter and hollow. "Have you never met me? I'm always dramatic."

"You already get to change the world," she points out. "You've got the whole defeating Hawk Moth thing going for you. That's more than most of us get."

"Defeating him isn't the same as changing him," Chat says. And Chloé thinks they might finally be circling toward what's actually wrong tonight. "We can lock him up and take away his power, but how do we change how he thinks? How do we get rid of his hunger for power. His willingness to manipulate people to get what he wants?"

Chloé stares at him. "Okay, you weren't kidding about getting deep."

"Saving people is important," Chat continues. "Helping people is important. Stopping Hawk Moth is important. But is it selfish to want to make one person reevaluate their life and life choices?"

"I don't think so," Chloé says softly.

His tail swishes slowly as he stares out at the sunset. "I want to do that."

Chloé casts her eyes to the ground. *You already have.*

—«·»—

It hasn't even been five minutes since Chat left her balcony and Chloé is already restless. It's like there's something inside her that's itching to go, to make sure that he's *really* okay.

If there's one thing she's learned about half of Paris' Dynamic Duo, it's that Chat Noir is very good at acting if he wants to be.

Chloé paces for a few more minutes on her balcony before she tosses her homework into her bag — she got half the problems done and that *has* to count for something — and transforms. She's never going to sleep if she doesn't.

It doesn't take her too long to find him. She's noticed that they all have their spots; private little places they each like to go when they have something on their minds. Hers in particular is a nice little alcove that overlooks a garden that's currently in bloom.

Chat's is near the top of the Eiffel Tower.

She hovers by him for a moment until he shifts to the side, giving her space to sit down next to him.

"What's up QB?" he asks, not moving his eyes from the building he's staring at. Probably not staring at. Probably looking past into nothing.

Bee rolls her eyes. "Are you sure you aren't American?"

He turns to her with twinkling eyes— a good sign. "*Pawsitive*."

She groans. "I walked right into that."

"You really did," Chat says with a laugh. "But you didn't answer my question."

"I was bored," Bee says with a shrug, pulling a knee up to her chest. "I saw you were out. I decided to join you. What about you? What's up?"

Chat leans forward and looks down. She still doesn't know how he does that without gripping the metal edge. He's so much more sure of his abilities and limits than she is and she's more than a little jealous. "Us, apparently."

Bee snorts.

Chat leans back with a smile. "A little of this, a little of that," he says, motioning with his hand. "Overall, a little of everything."

"Too much of everything?" she asks coolly, keeping eye contact.

Chat looks away. "I don't know." Bee hums. "I don't know," he goes on, "it's just nice up here, isn't it? Above everything? Kind of like you have nothing you have to worry about."

She watches him as he closes his eyes and breathes deeply.

"You can sit up here and watch the world turn below you. And know that you're watching out for everyone. And sometimes, that's all you need."

-sadrien

FRY

Green and Black

A sea of red and black spots greeted Adrien as he walked into the classroom, and he couldn't even say that he was surprised.

Even as the mayor declared the first official Ladybug and Chat Noir Appreciation Day, it was clear that there were invisible parentheses around his name; Ladybug (and Chat Noir) Appreciation Day. As the citizens of Paris took to the streets, dressed in honor of their heroes, the black and red outweighed the green and black by a country mile.

It wasn't as though Adrien was helping his case either, decked in his Ladybug patterned hoodie, but he wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to make his love for Ladybug known to everyone who saw him.

"Nice threads." Adrien turned around to see Alya coming in behind him, shooting him a small wink from behind Ladybug patterned glasses as she adjusted her Ladybug patterned ballcap.

"Nice glasses," Adrien replied as more and more of the class trailed in, most dotted in shades of red and black. "Bet you're loving this, aren't you?"

"The fact that Paris is going all out for Ladybug Day, or the fact that the Ladyblog's merchandise store has been cleaned out all month?" Alya asked with a smirk.

"Both," Adrien said, absentmindedly fidgeting with his hoodie strings. "How'd your Chat Noir merch do?"

"Pretty good," Alya shrugged. "We have a few hoodies left over, but his stuff sold well enough to send a good sized royalty check to that animal shelter he likes to volunteer at."

"That's good at least," Adrien said with a small smile. "He didn't outsell Ladybug though, did he?"

"He tried but…come on," Alya said with a lopsided grin. "No one's gonna outsell Ladybug, are they?"

"Nah…can't imagine he would," Adrien said, only slightly disappointed as he slid into his seat. "He's not exactly on Ladybug's level, is he?"

"Are you talking about Chat Noir?"

Adrien turned as Marinette's voice came from behind him, mouth hanging open mid-reply as she peered out from beneath a black and green hood. Of all the closet Chat Noir aficionados in his class, Adrien had hardly expected Marinette to turn up in a black and green hoodie with cat-ears sewn into the top.

"Uh-oh, I think you ticked off Chat Noir's biggest fan," Alya chuckled, elbowing Marinette in the arm.

"I-I don't know about that," Marinette stammered, scratching her arm as she was suddenly aware of how Adrien staring at her. "I just thought I heard you say something about not liking Chat Noir…"

"Oh, n-nothing like that!" Adrien said quickly, waving his hands, still trying to process the image before him. "I'm just…well, I'm just more of a Ladybug fan, you know?"

"You and most of the class," Marinette laughed, glancing around at the collection of card carrying Ladybug fans filing into their seats.

"Except you?" Adrien asked, suddenly curious.

"Yeah, I have to admit, I'm surprised to see you rocking the black and green today," Alya said, poking Marinette in the side. "I had you pegged for a Ladybug fan."

"I am!" Marinette insisted, playing with the hoodie's strings. "I just…look up to Chat Noir a little bit more, you know?"

A blossom of warmth pulsed through Adrien's chest. "Really? What about Chat Noir makes you like him more than Ladybug?"

"Oh this I *have* to hear." Adrien didn't miss the way Marinette's nose wrinkled as Chloe's voice came from behind him, decked out in a red-and-black that swished around her knees as she jumped up on the desk and leaned on Adrien's shoulder. "Tell us, Marinette; what exactly makes you think Chat Noir's better than Ladybug?"

"I never said he was *better*," Marinette said, crossing her arms across her chest. "I just said that I admired him more."

"You don't like Chat, Chloe?" Adrien asked, sliding out of her grip as subtly as possible.

"I never said that," Chloe said, holding her hands up. "Kitty boy does a good job backing Ladybug up, but let's not kid ourselves; Ladybug could handle any akuma Hawkmoth throws at her singlehandedly."

Adrien opened his mouth, but before he could defend his alter-ego, Marinette said, "Hey, Chat's saved Ladybug's bacon plenty of times!"

"Wound up getting possessed and brainwashed plenty of times too," Chloe said, examining her polka-dotted nail polish. "If *I* was Ladybug's partner, you wouldn't catch me dead betraying Paris' finest heroine."

"Oh yeah, I'm *super* sure you could resist whatever mind-control Hawkmoth drops on a daily basis," Marinette snorted, eyes glinting as Adrien fought to keep the smile off his face while Marinette unwittingly defended him. "And Ladybug always manages to snap him out of it before he causes any real harm, doesn't she?"

"Doesn't that just prove that Ladybug is better if she can beat her partner in every fight they've been in?" Chloe said, raising an eyebrow.

"No it *doesn't*!" Marinette said, pigtails bouncing as she shook her head. "Because it's not…"

Marinette trailed off as she realized half the class was listening to the debate with rapt attention, eyes trained on Marinette and Chloe as Adrien and Alya sat off to one side, waiting for Marinette's response.

"It's not what?" Adrien prompted, leaning in on his knees as Marinette scratched the back of her neck.

"It's…not the real Chat she's fighting, is it?" Marinette said, standing up a little straighter. "When he's brainwashed he doesn't have his biggest asset, does he?"

"His ring?" Chloe said.

"No…his heart," Marinette said simply, hands folded in front of her.

"Oh *please*," Chloe snorted, rolling her eyes. "I always knew you were corny, but I didn't know you were *this* corny."

"Hey, nobody asked!" Alya sniffed, nudging Marinette. "Though I'm curious as to why Marinette thinks she knows so much about the real Chat."

"O-Oh, I'm not an expert," Marinette said, waving her hand.

"Yeah, we knew that," Chloe laughed.

"Again, *no one asked*!" Alya snapped.

"But Chat always struck me as someone who puts his heart into every fight he's in," Marinette said, completely ignoring Chloe's outburst. "It seems like he leaves it all on the field, going in with no regrets and acting more on instinct than anything else. So if, say, Dark Cupid took away his free will…well, it's no wonder Ladybug got the better of him so easily. She may have won but…it didn't seem like he wanted to fight her at all. And I'd like to think something about him was fighting whatever force was controlling him."

"Don't you think you're giving Chat too much credit?" Adrien said. Adrien's memory of the times he had been forced to fight against Ladybug were—no pun intended—spotty. He often woke up afterwards without any clue as to what he had been doing other than a sense of guilt and uselessness that he had been used against his partner. "O-Or not giving Ladybug enough?"

"I'm not saying she's weaker than Chat or anything like that," Marinette said, eyes shining with the same kind of passion that sparkled when she talked about her art or designs. "I'm just saying that…"

She chewed on her lip, glancing at Adrien thoughtfully.

"…I just can't help but admire someone who has the power of destruction at his fingertips and somehow chooses to do good with it," Marinette said.

Adrien had to stop himself from looking down at his hand, but still clenched it in his pocket subconsciously. When Plagg had appeared to him, he had never questioned the path laid out before him; never considered the fact that his powers were, on the surface, more terrifying than Hawkmoth's. He didn't think it was something to celebrate, but still he couldn't bring himself to gainsay Marinette's point. Even Chloe seemed to be nonplussed by this, snorting derisively and meandering away as Sabrina traipsed in wearing a black and green beanie. She was in the middle of a conversation with Nino, who had swapped his usual headphones for a pair of green cat-eared ones. Even Ms. Bustier was sporting a black and green t-shirt under her red spotted blouse in a strange, heartwarmingly clashing ensemble.

"I'm sorry," Marinette said with a shaky laugh. "I just…think you should maybe give him a little more credit. He might not be as popular but…Chat Noir deserves just as much admiration as Ladybug does. You should…maybe give him a little more credit?"

His eyes swept the classroom, lingering on every student who showed up in green or cat themed clothing. There weren't all that many; most had come out in Ladybug's colors, and Adrien couldn't exactly blame them. She would always be his (and most people's favorite hero) and she deserved all the adoration Paris could give her. But the fact that someone like Marinette thought he was worth dressing in goofy cat ears for made Adrien's eyes prick enough to pretend to sneeze just to have an excuse for the water in his eyes.

"Yeah…maybe I should."

"Someone looks pensive."

The red and black antenna bobbers on Chat's headband bounced as he turned around, chuckling as he caught sight of Ladybug sporting a pair of ears on a headband and whisker face paint. Below them, the city gently teemed with the last throngs of party-goers reveling in the new localized holiday, huddled together as they waited for the fireworks to start over the Seine.

"Someone looks like they got ambushed by a five year old with markers," Chat said, tweaking one of Ladybug's little ears as she saddled up beside him.

"Says the boy wearing a headband," Ladybug said, flicking one of the antennae with her finger. "I thought the Ladyblog only sold those in kid's sizes."

"What can I say; I'm a big Ladybug fan," Chat said, legs dangling off the edge of the roof as he sat.

"You and most of the city," Ladybug sighed, glancing across at her partner after a moment of silence. "Hey…"

"Hm?" Chat turned to Ladybug in time to be pulled into a tight hug, his headband tumbling to the roof next to him.

"…thank you," Ladybug said so quietly that the first *boom* of fireworks lighting up the night sky above them nearly drowned her out. "I don't know if I say this enough but…I'm really, *really* thankful that I have you as my partner."

Part of him wondered if the day could get any better, heart fluttering as Ladybug pulled back with a slightly lopsided smile. "I know Paris plays favorites sometimes, but-"

She chewed her lip, blue eyes radiating a kind of warmth that seemed comfortingly familiar to him.

"-*you* are definitely *my* favorite," Ladybug said, her face glowing red with the lights of the Ladybug shaped fireworks booming overhead. And, despite the fact that Ladybug would *always* thrash him in popularity polls, he couldn't bring himself to care. He was happy being Ladybug's favorite, Sabrina's favorite, Nino's favorite, Marinette's favorite. He was happy knowing the people he admired most thought he was admiration in return. Even if he didn't have as many diehard fans, Adrien knew what it felt like to be loved wholeheartedly for the first time in such a long time.

And that, Adrien thought, was more than he could have ever hoped for when he first put on the ring.

"I think I can settle for being Paris' favorite hero's favorite hero," Chat said with a small laugh, eyes turning skyward as the firework show began in earnest. "For what it's worth…you're *my* favorite too."

"Really? I never would have guessed," Ladybug chuckled, nudging her partner's shoulder. "Happy Appreciation Day, kitty."

"You too, Bugaboo," Chat said, crossing his legs as a brilliant green firework in the shape of a paw burst overhead. As Ladybug's attention turned skyward, Chat glanced down, savoring the split second when he could see every smiling face turned up, bathed in the green light of the fireworks and swaddled in comforting black shadows.

For the faint flash of a firework, the whole city glowed for him.

-SiderealScribblings

SINDER

Skottan

SUGARBERRYART

#1
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Luck
talentlessartblog.tumblr.com

FANCLUB
TheBirdFromTheMoon-art

MORIAH DRAWS

BOULANGERIE
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PATISSERIE FINE
SPECIALITE DE
CROISSANTS
ULANGERIE
ATISSERIE
BOULAN RIE
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BOUL
PA
Thunderpot

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twin
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Yendinella
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Famille

Years from now, when even the memory of Ladybug and Chat Noir and their fight against Hawkmoth were little more than a memory in the distant past, Chat would still be able to pinpoint the exact day that the family he'd so long held dear began to fall apart.

It had started with his mother. His father had been in Milan to work on the debut show of his new line, having left the day after Christmas. The day had been rather quiet, and he'd been out at his fencing lessons. It had gone well; he'd even gotten out a few minutes earlier than usual. His instructor had told him it was because he'd done so well.

How he wished he'd never gone at all.

Nobody noticed that she'd gone missing, not at first. In fact, they'd all simply assumed she'd gone for a walk, as Mrs. Agreste commonly did on the claim that it helped her think. It wasn't until Nathalie found her phone sitting on the piano bench that doubt began to creep into their minds. Even so, they spent the evening placating each other.

"She's out on a walk, Adrien."

"She probably stopped by the bakery on the corner, huh Nathalie? She told me she likes their croissants."

It wasn't until night had fallen that their worry began to solidify, and Nathalie finally gave Gabriel a call. From there, they'd called the police, who'd patiently told them that they no longer conducted searches, but they would be willing to put her picture up on social media. That night was one of the few times Adrien had felt none of the guilt that usually plagued him when his father used his connections with the Mayor to get his way.

During the next twenty-four hours, two blondes arrived at their home, neither of which was his mother. The first was Gabriel, disheveled and frantic from the flight he'd immediately taken home. The next was Chloe, bearing a few of the Japanese snacks she knew Adrien was partial to. While he didn't mind the presence of either, Adrien would have traded them both for a chance to see his mother.

However, two weeks and several searches later, neither hide nor hair of the woman had been seen. The rain that fell nearly the entire time seemed a dark omen on both the past, present and future of ever finding her.

January turned to February when one more cog in the small machine that was the Agreste family fell out of place. The searches finally stopped, and it seemed, for a while, so did Gabriel. Then, with a fervor, the man threw himself into his work. The house that had so long been his only environment began to dull. Sometimes, he imagined that the bars that held his windows in place were actually those of a prison cell. Even the few forays he'd been allowed out of his home came to a halt, each new denial at his requests to leave sucking a bit of the color out of his world with it.

In March, Adrien saw very little of his father. The rational side of him understood that he was most likely grieving, just as Adrien himself was. It still felt like a thorn had been driven into his chest. Rather than his mother and father being the first people he saw in the morning, joined together in a breakfast that had been a tradition for so long, Adrien sat at a table on his own, forcing down the food that began to seem more like sand with each passing day. Nathalie became the first and last person he saw most days. Her familiar presence was welcome, even if saddening.

March rolled around, and Adrien began to run out of ways to occupy his time. Piano began to grow dull, Chinese monotonous. Even fencing began to bore him. He began to watch anime again, the stories a welcome escape from his own life.

The next few months passed much the same, despite the budding idea that grew in Adrien's head with each new show. August came, and he'd made his decision: he wanted to go to school. After all, his shows made it seem like such a bright place, full of learning and laughter. Full of *friends*. The request to go to school was the first thing Adrien asked for in nearly six months. His first response had been simple: a flat "no." Not even to his face, the message had been sent to him through Nathalie. But if he'd gotten anything from his parents, Adrien hadn't ever been one to give up on something once he'd set his mind to it. So he asked again, this time sending articles and facts on how it would improve his existence. Facts always seemed to penetrate his father's skull.

It worked, to a degree. He'd been called to his father's office, and for the first time in what seemed like forever, they had a conversation. It'd been somewhat one-sided, though Gabriel had been willing to listen to his opinion on the matter, at the very least. In the end, he'd been dismissed with a "maybe", which was far more than he'd been expecting.

However, as the starting date grew closer, he began to grow anxious. It wouldn't be unlike his father to get busy and forget to come back to him on it; he'd been so busy these days. So, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

It was surprisingly easy to sign yourself up for school.

When his father found out, he was, naturally, not happy. It had seemed he'd never intended to allow Adrien to go at all. The following lecture was one Adrien was unwilling to experience ever again, but he surprised to see that, despite the insistences that he stays home, he remained enrolled. Part of him suspected that it'd simply been forgotten.

Thus, when the first day rolled around, it was only natural that he attend. It was easy to sneak out that morning; his father had been at a meeting and Nathalie was occupied. He'd even made it halfway there before the family car began to follow suit, which, honestly, was farther than usual. Despite that, he found himself back at home in the end, morosely answering Nathalie's questions while his mind wandered to the thousands of different ways his day could be going had he made it to school.

At least, until his father returned and reiterated his stance on Adrien's imprisonment. The white of his father's coat was blinding as he retreated down the hall, taking what little hope he'd had left with it. Adrien had retreated to his room, where he sulked until a distant banging drew his attention. A super villain, they called it, even the police themselves seeming unsure whether they could handle the raging monster. It was nearly as interesting as one of his shows, so much so he nearly missed the little black box sitting on his table.

For all his imaginings on one day becoming a superhero, he hadn't expected part of it to be a little cat attempting it eat his foosball table.

The little flare of hope sparked in his chest once more, and he barely listened to the little ca-er, *kwami*'s explanation (once he'd managed to catch it) before he'd called out the given phrase, and found himself for the first time, fully and completely free.

During his first battle, Chat Noir learned two things: that pole vaulting was surprisingly easy, and his partner was, without a doubt, the most flawless person he'd ever had the chance to meet. Even with the obvious nerves, she handled the situation with a grace and power that was beyond belief. It was immediately easy to see why she'd been chosen for the job. She was crazy, yes, but that quality drew him in even more. She stuck to his mind long after he'd rushed away to hide and detransform.

After the battle, he rode high on the resulting adrenaline for a long time. It gave him the boost he needed to return to the school once more, much more successfully than last time.

Yet, despite all the shows he'd watched, all the confidence he'd had that he'd have the best time of his life there, the school was nothing like he'd expected. Chloe was there, and while he was excited to see her, it wasn't hard to see that nobody else was. Each time somebody learned of their friendship, any friendliness in their body seemed to drain away. It took only a few "so you're Chloe's friend"s tossed in his direction before he was tired of the phrase. He was popular, yes, which he'd expected. Agreste was a well-known name, and when you added in the fact that there were no less than three posters with his face on them simply between his home and the school, Adrien wasn't surprised to see the positive reactions to his presence.

Chloe, however, was just so much more… *vitriolic* than he'd expected. Yes, she'd been somewhat rude when they were growing up, but never in his direction, and never to this immediate degree. He wasn't sure what the girl she'd chosen to tease had done, but gum on a seat wasn't very kind. Being blamed for the action hurt, yes, but even as his dark-haired scowled and took her seat, he couldn't bring himself to out that Chloe had done it, and risk his only current friendship.

Luckily, Nino seemed to be willing to change that. The smile that fell upon his face as they shook hands felt more genuine than usual.

It wasn't long before Ivan became Stoneheart once more, and Adrien found his slowly brightening day brightening even more. Part of him supposed he should be more somber about this, given that the entire city was partially under his protection, but the sense of freedom seemed to override it all. He was going to help protect Paris, and he was going to have fun while doing it. Ladybug's speech only solidified this belief, and with every butterfly that fell into the clutches of her yo-yo, he felt himself fall a little bit more in love.

Just as the months following his mother's disappearance seemed a steady downslide into a world of gray, the months after Ladybug's appearance were a slow walk back into the sunlight. With each passing day, he found himself closer. Closer to Marinette and Nino and Alya, closer to his Lady, closer to catching Hawkmoth. He found himself making mistakes along the way and watched others make mistakes just the same. He learned that friendships were so much more than what they showed on a TV screen. They were tangible things, sometimes so much so that he lie awake at night, hugging a pillow and *thinking* about all of them.

His mother may be gone, yes, and his father still distant. But soon "family" became more than just blood. Ladybug was his family as well, and so were his classmates. His life had turned a new page that he'd previously lost all hope for. Rather than going to sleep each night simply out of boredom or necessity, he went in excitement, wanting the night to pass all the more quickly so that he might see their faces once more. He still had photo shoots, and all the mandatory lessons his father required of him. He was still expected to be the best. Plagg still left him smelling like cheese to the point that others moved away on occasion. But ever since the kwami and the ring had come into his life, things had gotten infinitely better.

And maybe that change was exactly why they called them Miraculous.

-wispedheart

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